

יהודה הלוי
שירים נבחרים



THE SELECTED POEMS OF
Yehuda Halevi



TRANSLATED & ANNOTATED BY
Hillel Halkin

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The Poet Thanks an Admirer for a Jug of Wine
בך אעיר זמרות

To Moshe ibn Ezra, on His Leaving Andalusia
איך אהריך אמצאה מרגוע

To Yitzhak ibn el-Yatom
ארץ בילדה היתה יונקת

Carved on a Tombstone
הידעו הדמעות מי שפכם

A Wedding Poem
עזוב לראות אשר יהיה והיה

Ofra
עפרה

Love's War
לקראת חלל חשקך קרב החזיקי

Why, My Darling, Have You Barred All News?
מה לך צביה תמנעי ציריך

On the Death of Yehuda ibn Ezra
ראה זמן כי האנוש הבל

A Lament for Moshe ibn Ezra
ידענוך נדר מימי עלומים

On the Death of a Daughter
זה בתי השכחת משכנך

Lord, Where Will I Find You?
יה אנה אמצאך

The Dream
נמת ונרדמת

Nishmat
יחידה שחרי האל וספיו

Barkhu
יעירוני בשמך רעיוני

Ge'ula
יעבר עלי רצונך

Ahava
יעלת חן ממעונה רחקה

Waked By My Thoughts
יעירוני רעיוני

Lord, You Are My Sole Desire
אדני נגדך כל תאותי

In the Temple
אלהי משכנותיך ידירות

My Heart in the East
לבי במזרח

To Jerusalem
יפה נוף משוש תבל

Zion, Do You Wonder?
ציון הלא תשאלני לשלום אסיריך

A Man in Your Fifties
התרדף נערות אחר חמישים

Driven by Longing for the Living God
הציקתני תשוקתי לאל חי

A Letter from Aboard Ship
קראו עלי בנות ומשפחות

At Sea
הבא מבול

Egypt
ראה ערים

From Age to Age
אלהי פלאך דור דור ירחש

Let's Have More Lutes for the Lovely Girls
יפי קול קדמו כנור ליפות

By the Nile
הפשט הזמן בגדי חרדות

On Shlomo ibn Gabbai
בשוטי מעברות מזרח ותימן

On Boarding Ship in Alexandria
לעת כזאת

On Parting from Aharon el-Ammani
הרף שאון ים

West Wind
זה רוחך צד מערב רקוח

Foreword

JONATHAN ROSEN

Editorial Director

Nextbook, Inc.

YEHUDA HALEVI, who lived more than 900 years ago, was arguably the greatest poet Judaism has produced, and one of the world's great poets. Nextbook Press is pleased to make available this collection of 35 poems by Halevi in their original Hebrew, alongside masterful translations by renowned essayist, critic, and translator Hillel Halkin. Each poem has been annotated by Halkin to offer brief commentary and context for a poet who could be intensely erotic, confessional, spiritual, and liturgical, often at the same time.

This collection of poems is a companion volume to *Yehuda Halevi*, the magisterial biography written by Halkin and published by Nextbook/Schocken Books in 2010. In that book, Halkin tells one of the greatest romantic stories in all of Jewish history. Halevi was born in Spain at the height of its Golden Age, but though he was celebrated as a master of the poetic forms of this most poetic era, enjoying wealth and fame as a poet, physician, and sage, in 1140, then in his late sixties, he turned his back on Spain and sailed for Crusader-ruled Palestine.

For hundreds of years, legend had it that Halevi was killed by a Muslim horseman at the gates of Jerusalem. Although even today it is not clear how much truth there is in this, modern scholarship has revealed that he did die in the land of Israel within several months of arriving there. Halkin traces the overlapping strands of myth and history, the secular and the sacred, the rootedness of Spain and the unquenchable longing for the land of Israel that Halevi braided into his poetry, and that Judaism braided into its legend of the poet. We hope readers of this volume will want to turn to Halkin's *Yehuda Halevi* for a full portrait of the man and his world and its meaning. But we are extremely pleased to give readers a chance to encounter Halevi purely as a poet, both in the original Hebrew and in the English of a master translator.

Introduction

HILLEL HALKIN

Translator & Annotator

THE ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS of the 35 poems posted below all appear as part of my biography of Yehuda Halevi published by Schocken Books and Nextbook in 2010. In preparing the book for publication, I had wanted to include the original poems in an appendix, so that readers with some knowledge of Hebrew could read them with the help of the English and have a better idea of both what Yehuda Halevi and I had done. Unfortunately, this proved impractical. I am therefore grateful to Nextbook for making possible on the Internet what could not be done in print.

A few, brief words on technical matters for those who are interested:

Translating Hispano-Hebrew poetry into English is in some respects a more difficult task than translating French, German, or Russian poetry. This is because, of its two main formal characteristics, Arabic-style mono-rhyme and Arabic-style quantitative meter, the first is rarely reproducible in English and the second never is.

Mono-rhyme—the repetition of a single rhyming syllable throughout a poem, no matter how long it is—is possible in Hebrew and Arabic because both languages have numerous stressed grammatical suffixes that can be rhymed line after line. An example of this is Poem 10, “A Lament For Moshe ibn Ezra,” in which the last word of every one of the poem’s 34 Hebrew lines has the masculine plural ending *–im*. (A line in most Hispano-Hebrew poems was a distich numbering between 20 and 30 syllables and divided into two equal hemistichs. Because the Hebrew texts in this selection were taken from different anthologies, some poems appear with longer, distich-length lines and some with the shorter, hemistich-length ones into which their editors divided them.) In English, on the other hand, grammatical suffixes like “–s,” “–ing,” and “–ed” are unstressed and do not rhyme.

To be sure, Arabic-style mono-rhyming in Hebrew is not so easy, either, since the initial consonant of the rhyming syllable must repeat itself, too; thus, in “A Lament For Moshe ibn Ezra,” each line ends in *–mim* and Halevi had to restrict himself to plurals of nouns, verbs, and adjectives having the final Hebrew letter *mem*. Yet Hebrew has large inventories of such words, whereas a mono-rhymed 34-line poem in English is all but unimaginable.

Although such a rhyme scheme in a Hispano-Hebrew poem, especially a long one, may seem monotonous to our ears, its purpose is not the same as that of European rhyme. Rather than create a varied pattern of sameness-within-difference that links certain lines while separating them from others (as in a sonnet, for instance), it functions like a repetitive drum beat or plucked chord, regularly marking the point where one musical phrase ends and the next begins. Nor is the English translator completely helpless in the face of it. He can rhyme in some places and not others, or resort to long strings of slant-rhymes or unstressed English suffixes that do not rhyme. In different translations, I have tried all of these methods.

As for Arabic quantitative meter, it depends on a regular alteration of long and short syllables, the distinction between which is intrinsic to Arabic phonetics and grammar. In point of fact, not only English, but Hebrew as well, recognizes no such distinction. Yet in Hispano-Hebrew poetry, starting with the mid-10th century, vowels came to be arbitrarily defined as long or short to adapt them to the Arabic system. The *shva na*, *ḥataf pataḥ*, *ḥataf kamatz*, and *ḥataf segol*, and sometimes the conjunctive *shuruk*, were treated as short; all other vowels, as long. Apart from liturgical verse, most Hispano-Hebrew poems of Halevi’s age were composed according to this system, which no English translation can convey.

Here, too, however, the English translator is not without recourses. Since, for grammatical reasons, Hispano-Hebrew’s “short” syllables are all unstressed, Arabic-style quantitative meter in Hebrew tends to result in regular patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables like those found in English poetry, so that a line of Yehuda Halevi’s read aloud is not very different in its metrical effect from, say, a line of John Donne’s. In translating Halevi’s poetry, therefore, I have generally fallen back on the common English meters. These do not necessarily have the same stressed/unstressed sequences as does Halevi’s Hebrew, and I often chose them on the basis of the first line or two of a translation to come to mind, instinctively following my ear without noticing where it was leading me—but this, after all, is how a great deal of metrical poetry gets written. Because medieval Hebrew is a more highly inflected and compact language than English, I also usually turned the hemistiches of Halevi’s Hebrew into separate lines of English. In some cases, I broke Halevi’s verse into separate stanzas in places where he did not have them.

Hispano-Hebrew poets did not punctuate their work; all the punctuation marks in this selection of poems have been added for intelligibility either by myself or by other anthologists. Nor did the poets of Halevi’s time give titles to their poems, which were known to their readers and to posterity by their first words or line. In some cases, I have followed this practice in English. In others, I have given poems titles of my own.

In short, in translating these poems I have not followed any one strategy. Each poem was a challenge in its own right and I sometimes responded to similar challenges in different ways. Like all Hispano-Hebrew poets, Halevi was extremely fond of puns, complicated wordplay, and alliteration, and I have sought to represent these aspects of his verse, too—although, again, not always on a direct basis: an alliterative cluster of words in one of his lines may have been transferred by me to another, a play on words that I could not capture where it occurred may have had a different one substituted for it further on.

Like all great poets, Yehuda Halevi is translatable, but like all great poets, too, he is a greater poet in his own language. I hope the 35 poems appearing below in Hebrew and English will convince the reader of both these truths.



בֶּךָ אֶעִיר זְמֵרוֹת

The Poet Thanks an Admirer for a Jug of Wine

בֶּךָ אֶעִיר זְמֵרוֹת כָּל יְמוֹתַי וּבִעְסִיסְךָ אֲשֶׁר מָצוּ שְׁפָתַי,
וְאֲחִי אֶקְרָא אֶל כָּד שְׁלַחְתּוֹ וּמִפִּי אֲטַעֲמָה טוֹב מִגְדָּנוֹתַי,
עָדִי רְעִי חֲשֹׁבוֹנִי לְסוֹכָא וְעַקֵּב זֹאת שְׁאִילוֹנִי "לְמַתִּי?"
עֲנִיתִים, "אֵיךְ צָרִי גִלְעָד לְנִגְדִי – וְלֹא אֲשַׁתָּה לְרִפָּא מַחֲלוֹתַי?
וְאִיכָּה אֶמָּאֶסָה בְּכַד עֲדָנָה – וְעוֹד לֹא נִגְעוּ עַד כִּ"ד שָׁנוֹתַי!"

I shall sing your praise all my days
For the nectar you sent for my lips.
Brother Jug joins in my lays,
And from him I won't cease my sips

Even though all my friends say, "Come, come!
How much longer will you play the rake?"
"What?" I'll reply. "I have Gilead's balm
And shan't drink to cure every ache?

"I'm too young to put down the cup
I've only begun to pick up. To and for
What end should I stop
When my years are not yet two and four?"

Although not necessarily the earliest poem of Halevi's to have come down to us, this is the earliest that is datable, written, as its last, punning stanza informs us, when the poet was not yet 24. (In Hebrew, the pun is on the word *kad*, "jug," whose two letters *kaf* and *dalet* have the numerical value of 20 and four.) This does not, of course, mean that he was 23, as he could have been quite a few years younger. In any event, he was sitting, so it would seem, in a tavern with friends when an admirer sent over a jug of wine, to which he replied with some improvised verse.

"The Poet Thanks an Admirer" is written in five mono-rhymed distichs, each composed of two 11-syllable hemistichs. Its meter, known in Hebrew as the *m'rubeh*, is *short-long-long-long, short-long-long-long, short-long-long-long*. As was customary in mono-rhymed poems, the rhyming syllable is introduced by the internal rhyme of *y'motai* and *s'fatai* in the first distich. The poem's 10 hemistichs have been rearranged in my translation as the 12 lines of three predominantly anapestic, ABAB-rhymed English quatrains.

As an aspiring young poet, Yehuda Halevi left the Christian north of Spain in which he was born for the Muslim south, with its more lively and sophisticated literary culture. There, in Andalusia, the great Hispano-Hebrew poet and critic Moshe ibn Ezra (1055–1135) was his first and most important literary patron. Ibn Ezra belonged to a wealthy and prominent family in Granada, but following the Almoravid conquest of that city in 1090, which took place when Halevi was in his teens, he was driven into exile in northern Spain. In this poem of farewell, Halevi calls him “Beacon of the West” because Andalusia was at the western end of the medieval Muslim world. To reach Christian territory, Ibn Ezra would have had to cross its high mountains to the Castilian plateau. These are refigured in the poem as Mount Hermon, the Land of Israel’s tallest peak, and lowly Mount Gilboa, cursed with barrenness by the biblical David, the two symbolizing the more cultivated Spanish south and the less lettered north.

Like “The Poet Thanks an Admirer,” “To Moshe ibn Ezra” consists of five distichs, which have the mono-rhyme of –o’ā. Its meter, known as the *shalem*, is long-long-short-long, long-long-short-long, long-long-long. The *m’rubeh* and the *shalem* were the two meters most favored by Halevi, who wrote a high percentage of his poems in them. The meter of the translation is that old English mainstay, iambic pentameter, and I have used similarly ending half-rhymes (“rest,” “last,” “crossed,” “against,” “West,” “cast”) in six of the translation’s ten lines.



אֵיךְ אַחֲרֶיךָ אֶמְצָא מְרוּנָה?

To Moshe ibn Ezra, On His Leaving Andalusia

אֵיךְ אַחֲרֶיךָ אֶמְצָא מְרוּנָה?
תֵּנֵנִי וְהֵלֵב עִמָּךְ יְנוּעַ.
לִי לִבְבוֹת יִחְלוּ יוֹם שׁוֹבְךָ
אִזּוֹ יוֹם פְּרִידָה תִּמְנֶנּוּ לְגֹעַ.
הֵן הַרְרֵי בְּתֵר יַעֲדוֹן כִּי מִטֵּר
שִׁחַק מְאֹד בִּילִי וְדַמְעֵי שׁוּעַ.
נֵר מַעֲרָבִי שׁוֹב לְמַעְרָבְךָ, הִיא
חוֹתֵם עָלַי כָּל לֵב וְכָל אֶזְרוּעַ!
שָׁפָה בְּרוּחָהּ, מֶה לָּךְ אֶל עֲלִיָּם,
אוּ מֶה לְטֹל הָרְמוֹן אֶלִּי גִלְבוּעַ?

Where, now that you are gone, will I find rest?
When you departed, with you went all hearts,
And had they not believed you would return,
The day you left them would have been their last.
Be my witnesses, wild mountains that you crossed,
That heaven’s rains are scant when set against
My wealth of tears. Beacon of the West,
Be again our seal and coat-of-arms!
What will you do, O peerless tongue, among the dumb,
Like Hermon’s dew on bare Gilboa cast?

אַרץ כִּילְדָה הִיתָה יוֹנָקָה

To Yitzhak ibn el-Yatom

A wealthy Andalusian Jew, Yitzhak ibn el-Yatom was a patron of Yehuda Halevi's in the period following Moshe ibn Ezra's banishment from Andalusia. Hispano-Hebrew poets were expected to praise their patrons lavishly in verse, and not all of the flattery in this poem need be assumed to have been sincere. Yet it is marvelously well-crafted flattery, written in an Arabic form known as the *qasida*, a longish poem that begins with a secondary theme—here, a description of a flower-strewn Andalusian spring morning into which a group of early-rising picnickers ventures with a hamper of wine. Only when this scene has been fully developed does the poet introduce his main theme, the extolling of “the dearest friend,” Ibn el-Yatom, whose first name of Yitzhak, like that of the biblical patriarch, means “he laughs.”

The Hebrew is mono-rhymed. Apart from a few places, such as the poem's closing lines, my translation foregoes rhyming.

אַרץ כִּילְדָה הִיתָה יוֹנָקָה
גִּשְׁמִי סִתּוֹ אֶתְמוֹל וְעַב מִיִּנְקָה,
אוֹ הִיתָה כְּלָה כְּלוּאַה בְּסִתּוֹ,
נִפְשָׁה לְעֵתוֹת אֲהָבָה שׁוֹקֶקֶת,
הִשְׁקָה לְעֵת דּוּדִים עָדִי נִגַּע זִמָּן
קִיץ וְכוּ נִרְפָּא לִבִּב הִשְׁקָה.
בְּלִבוֹשׁ עֲרוּגָת פֹּז וְרִקְמַת שֵׁשׁ כִּבְת
מִתְעַנְּגָה בְּלִבוֹשׁ וּמִתְפַּנֶּקֶת,
כָּל יוֹם חֲלִיפּוֹת הֶרְקָמוֹת תַּחֲלִיף
וְלִכָּל סְבִיבֶיהָ בְּסוֹת חֲלָקֶת.
מִיּוֹם לְיוֹם עֵינַי צִמְחִים תַּהֲפֹךְ,
עֵין דֶּר לְעֵין אָדָם וְעֵין בְּרֶקֶת,
תִּלְבִּין וְתוֹרִיק עֵת וְגַם עֵת תֵּאָדִים
תִּמְשִׁיל צְבִיָּה אֲהָבָה נִשְׁקָה.
יָפוּ פִּרְחֶיהָ מְאֹד עַד אֲחֻשׁוֹב
כִּי כּוֹכְבִי אֵל הִיתָה עֹשֶׁקֶת.
פִּרְדֵּם שְׁלַחֶיהָ שְׁחֲרָנוּהוּ בְּכַת
גִּפֶּן בְּרִשְׁפֵי אֲהָבָה הִנִּשְׁקָה,
קָרָה בְּקָר שֶׁלֹּג בֵּיד תִּפְשָׁה אֶכֶל
בִּינּוֹת קָרְבִּיו הִיא כְּאֵשׁ דּוֹלֶקֶת.
מִתּוֹךְ כָּלִי חֶרֶשׁ בַּחֶרֶס תַּעֲלֶה
נִגִּישׁ כָּלִי שֶׁהֵם וְהִיא מוֹצֶקֶת,
כֹּה נִהְלָךְ תַּחַת צִלָּלִים עַל סִבִּב
גִּנָּה לִבְכִּית הָרָבִיב שִׁחֲקָה.
תִּשְׁמַח וְדִמְעַת עַב בְּפִנְיָה רְסִים
כְּזֶרֶק בְּדוֹלַח מַעַנֵּק זוֹרֶקֶת;
תִּשְׁיֵשׁ עָלַי קוֹל סִים בְּעַל עֶסִים וְקוֹל
יוֹנָה מְנַהֶגֶת וְסוּד מִמִּתְקָה;
תֵּרֶן בְּעַד עָלָה בְּרֶן עֲלָמָה בְּעַד
מָסַךְ וְרִקְדָּת וּמִשְׁתַּקְשָׁקֶת.
נִפְשִׁי לְרוּחַ הַשְּׁחָרִים שִׁחֲרָה
כִּי כֹה לְרִיחַ הַיָּדִיד חִבֶּקֶת.
רוּחַ מִשְׁחָקֶת וְתַנְיָף הַהֶדֶם
רִיחוֹ לְחִשְׁקִים רַחֲקוֹ מִרְחָקֶת,
וְסַעִיף הַדֶּם יִגָּאֶה וְיִכְפֹּל וְכָף
תִּמָּר בְּרֶן צִפּוֹר לִכְף סוּפָקֶת,
מִתְנַוֶּפֶּה מִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה נִגַּד פָּנָי
יִצְחָק וְתִבֵּל עִם שְׁמוֹ צִחֲקָה.
תֹּאמַר, “הֲלֹא עָשָׂה אֱלֹהִים לִי צָחוּק
כִּי בַעֲבַת יִצְחָק אֲנִי מַחֲזֹקֶת!”
אָמַר: וְאֵין מִשִּׁיב אֲמָרִי עַל שְׂבַח
הוֹדוֹ וְאֵזֶן שְׁמָעָה מְצַדֶּקֶת.
שֵׁם כָּל נְדִיבִים נִחְלַק אֶל טוֹב וְרָע—
אֲכֵן שְׁמוֹ רַק טוֹב כָּלִי מַחֲלָקֶת!
מֶה נִעְמָה אֲזֹנִי בְּשִׁמְעוֹ בְּאֶשֶׁר
נִפְשִׁי כּוֹזְכּוֹ הִיתָה עוֹסֶקֶת,
אֵךְ בַּחֲזוֹתָהּ אֶת דְּמוּתוֹ יִסְפֶּה
שְׂבַח וְכִפְלָיִם לְשִׁיר מַעֲתָקֶת!
בֶּךְ הַגִּבִּיר יִצְחָק לְשׁוֹנֵי תַעֲנָה
צָחוֹת וְשִׁיר תַּחֲבִיר וְלֹא מַפְסָקֶת,
כִּי אֲכַרְתָּה עִמָּךְ יָמֵי חַיֵּי בְרִית
מִמַּחֲלָלֶךְ בַּל תִּהְיֶי שִׁתְּקָה.
מֶה זֹאת אֶקְדֵּם מִשְׁבַּחֶיךָ וְהֵן
נִפְשֶׁךְ כָּכָל מִיָּנִי יִקָּר מְדַבֶּקֶת?
בֶּךְ הַנְּדִיבוֹת אֲהַלִּיחֶם תִּקְעוּ
וְלֶךְ תְּבוּנָה מַחֲנֶה מְזַעֶקֶת.
נִפְשֶׁךְ בְּדוּדֵי הַתְּבוּנָה רוּתָה
וְלִתְעַלְמָה אַחֲרִית בּוֹדֶקֶת,
כִּי מִצָּאָה קֵן לֹה בְּלִפְךָ וְתִהְיֶי
מִשְׁתַּעֲשָׂעָה עִמָּךְ וּמִתְרַפֶּקֶת.
לִכֵּן פָּרָה וְרִבָּה וְהִנְחִיל זֶרַעַךְ
רוּחַ נְדִיבָה לְךָ וְיָד מַעֲנֶקֶת,
וְרֹאֶה בְּנֵי בָנִים לְבִנְיָךְ וְעַב
חֶסֶד עֲלֵיהֶם תִּהְיֶה יוֹצֶקֶת.

The earth's an infant, sucking at the breast
Of winter's showers, the clouds her wet nurse—
Or better yet, a maiden, long kept indoors by cold,
Who longed for love. Now, the warm days here,
Her pining heart is healed. Coquettishly,
She stepped outside today in a new dress,
White-trimmed with gold embroidery,
Long skirt spread wide. Yet every day
She wears a different pattern of wild flowers:
Now pink, now turquoise, now a pearly pale,
Now blushing red as though kissed by a lover.
So glorious a garland must have been
Stolen by her from the stars in heaven!

Come, then, let us picnic on her greensward
With the passionate daughters of the vine!
(Chilly to the touch, they're inward fire,
Hot with sunshine hoarded in a pot
And poured from there into the finest crystal.)
We'll greet the dawn in a tree-shaded park,
Whose boughs weep softly from a last
spring rain,
As through her tears she smiles and wipes away
The drops that fall like beads of glass unstrung,
Rejoicing with the vine's juice and the jays
And murmuring doves, and fluttering gaily,
Like a dancing girl, behind a veil of leaves.

I fain would rise at such a sunrise to a breeze
That brings embraces from a dearest friend!
Let it play around the myrtle's branches
And bear their scent to cherished hearts afar
While palm trees clap their hands at the
birds' song,
So that they wave and bow to Yitzhak,
Whose name means laughter and with whom
all laugh.
“It is a godly jest,” the whole world says,
“To put the All in thrall to just one man!”
And I reply: Refute me if you can,
But Yitzhak's glory cannot be denied.
Although no ordinary grandee is all good
Without a modicum of bad, in him
Not a smatter of the latter's to be had.
My ears are gladdened when, thinking of him,
I hear his name; think then how seeing him
Would double and redouble my acclaim!

For you, Don Isaac, my voice flows in pure verse,
The pursuance of your praises my life's pledge.
Yet how win the race to add to these
When you are surrounded by such honors?
All the virtues have pitched camp in you,
And your wisdom rallies their joint forces;
Drinking deeply from discernment's sources,
You plumb the mysteries of things unseen,
Whose knowledge nests and frolics in your being.
Go forth and multiply, and give your progeny
The spirit of your generosity,
And may their sons and son's sons have more sons
On whom God's grace rains down its benisons!

In addition to the financial support of patrons, the young Halevi made a living by writing verse to order for occasions like weddings and funerals. Only three distichs long, this little poem was composed for the tombstone of an unknown “grandee.” Its lovely music depends equally on its mono-rhyme of *-kham* and its repetition of key words (e.g., *hafakham*, *r’gavim*, *b’tokham*) at the end and beginning of consecutive lines, causing it to double back on itself each time that it also moves forward.

הַיָּדְעוּ הַדְּמָעוֹת מִי שֶׁפָּכֶם

Carved on a Tombstone

הַיָּדְעוּ הַדְּמָעוֹת מִי שֶׁפָּכֶם
וַיֵּדְעוּ הַלִּבָּבוֹת מִי הֶפְכֶם?
הֶפְכֶם בּוֹא מְאוֹרֵס תּוֹךְ רִגְבִּים
וְלֹא יֵדְעוּ רִגְבִּים מֶה בְּתוֹכָם.
בְּתוֹכָם יֵשׁ וְגָדוֹל, תָּם וַיֵּשֶׁר,
יֵרָא הָאֵל וְאִישׁ נָבוֹן וְחָכָם.

Does the tear know whose cheek it runs down,
Or the heart by whom it is turned?
It turns to its light that is now in the ground,
And the ground knows not who has returned.
Returned is a grandee of our town,
A man who feared God and was upright and learned.

עֶזוֹב לְרֵאוֹת אֲשֶׁר יְהִיָּה וְהִיָּה

A Wedding Poem

The identity of the couple whose wedding Halevi celebrated in this poem is also unknown. Moving from initial humor to ultimate gravity, his poem was undoubtedly meant to be read aloud to the wedding guests. For all its light touch, its final declaration that every groom and bride are an Adam and Eve illuminating, however briefly, a fallen world with new hope is a solemn one.

I have translated the poem's six distichs as English couplets, each with its own rhyme.

עֶזוֹב לְרֵאוֹת אֲשֶׁר יְהִיָּה וְהִיָּה
 וְקַח לְךָ מֵאֲשֶׁר תִּרְאֶה רְאִיָּה!
 צָבִי יָצוּד בְּעֵינָיו הָאֲרִיּוֹת
 תִּצּוּדֵנוּ בְּעֵינֶיהָ צִבְיָה,
 בְּעֵין אִם תִּמְיָתֵנוּ וְיָמוֹת
 וְשִׁפָּה אִם תִּחְיֶיהוּ וְחַיָּה.
 שְׁנֵי אֲבָנֵי יָקָר הֵמָּה וְהָאֵל
 אֶסְפָּם לְהִיּוֹת אֶכָּן שְׁתֵּיָּה,
 מְאוּרֵי אוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מֵאֲפֵלִיָּה
 וְנִהְרֵי נַחֲלֵי עֵדֶן בְּצִיָּה.
 יָקָר נִתְּלָה בְּכָבוֹד מִן בְּמִינוֹ
 בְּהַתְּלוֹת בְּהִנָּה בְּלוּיָה.

Leave what was and what will be.

Stick to what you plainly see!

Every lad must hunt his lion,

And each lass should keep her eye on

Her young man: One look can bag him,

And a single word may snag him.

Yet when to a gem a gem engaged is,

God joins them in a rock of ages

Whose bright rays light up the dark

And of this waste make Eden's park.

By two such souls we now stand blessed

As though by Levite and by Priest.

The subject of this bantering epigram may have been a real woman with whom the young Halevi conducted a disappointing flirtation or simply a pretext for a display of wit. "Ofra," in any case, would certainly not have been the young lady's real name. The word means "doe" in Hebrew, and stags and does were conventional metaphors for male and female lovers in the Arabic and Hebrew poetry of the age.

עפרה

Ofra

עֲפְרָה תִכְבֵּס אֶת בְּגָדֶיהָ בְּמִי
דְּמָעִי וְתִשְׁטַחֵם לְשֶׁמֶשׁ זֹהָרָה:
לֹא שֶׁאֵלָה מִי הָעֵינֹת – עִם שְׂתִי
עֵינִי, וְלֹא שֶׁמֶשׁ – לִיפִי תֵאָרָה.

Ofra does her laundry in my tears
And dries it in the sunshine she gives off.
She doesn't have to take it to the trough,
Or wait to hang it till the weather clears.

לקראת חלל השקד קרב החזיקי

Love's War

לקראת חלל השקד קרב החזיקי, ובאש נדד האהבה הדליקני.
מאסת בי על-כן תריקין לי חנית, ואני בנפשי אמאסה – הריקני!
רעית צבי, לא-טוב היות דודך שבי, קרבי ורכבי הנדד הרחיקני.
ערש דוי הפכי לערש תענוג, ודבש וחלב אהבך הניקני.

Over this fallen soldier fight your war,
Then make him burn still more as you withdraw.
You have stopped loving me, so cast your spear
And let it strike a heart that doesn't care.

And yet, my sweet, I deem it not seemly
That I should languish in captivity.
Reverse your chariot and with one kiss
Convert my sickbed to a bed of bliss!

In their fusing together of the physical and the spiritual, their love of fanciful conceits, and the playful intricacy of their language, the great Hispano-Hebrew poets of the 11th and 12th centuries have been compared to the Metaphysical poets of 17th-century England, and my rendition of this four-distich poem of Halevi's may make some readers think of Robert Herrick or Andrew Marvell. Yet the poem, with its metaphor of sexual warfare, is equally typical of its place and time. Like "Ofra," it was most probably written by Halevi when he was in his twenties, prior to the poignant love affair described in "Why, My Darling, Have You Barred All News?"

מה לך צביה, תמנעי צריך

Why, My Darling, Have You Barred All News?

This is one of the greatest of Halevi's poems, probably the first written by him to earn him a place in the pantheon of Hebrew verse. If the women in "Ofra" and "Love's War" were either poetic inventions or passing episodes, the woman in "Why, My Darling?" was real and momentous. She was someone Halevi had an intense love affair with in the years before his marriage and who then, to his anguish, left him for a journey from which she sent no word of herself. This is all we know about her.

I have sought to imitate the poem's mono-rhyme of *-ayikh*, which occurs in all of its 39 distichs, by ending each of my translation's 73 lines with an "s" sound. Yet not only does this lack the musical effect of true rhyme, the rhyme it fails to reproduce is inimitable. Consisting of the two syllables of the second-person singular, feminine, possessive suffix *-ayikh*, "your," it builds up slowly into a haunted cry for the missing loved one. Moreover, since it is close in sound to *ayekh*, the feminine form of "Where are you?," this question repeats itself like a subliminal lament at the end of each line.

מדוד, צלעיו מלאו צריך?
בלתי שמע קול שלמותי?
עמדי מעט עד־אחזה פניך!
לבי ואם ילך למסעך.
אזכר אני לילות תשוקותיך,
כן אעברה־נא בחלומותיך!
גליו, ולא־אוכל עבר אליך,
אז נבקעו מימיו לכף רגליך.
קול פעמן זהב עלי שוליך,
אשאל בדדיך ובשלומיך!
עדים: לחניך ושתותיך—
דמי ועלכי שפכו ידיך?
שנים להוסיף על־שני חייך.
אתן שנת עיני לעפעפיך!
אבני לכבות שחקו מימיך,
לבי בדמעותי וגחליך!
ראש הנדד ודבש נשיקותיך,
אתו, פתילם קצצו ידיך.
אראה שפתיך עלי שניך,
על־זהרו— עבי קוצותיך;
החן והיפי בסות עיניך,
ההוד והחמדה שכיותיך;
להיות באחך ואהיותיך,
להיות עבדיך ושפחותיך.
מחוט שפתיך, חגור מתניך:
נרדי ומרי בין שני שדיך.
אחיה כחותם על זרעותיך:
אם־אשכחה אהבת כלולתיך.
נפת שפתי מנשיקותיך;
אולי בריחי אשקה אפיך!
בך נכבדו היום תהלותיך:
תשתחווין לאלמותיך!
בשם ומר מבין הליכותיך:
סתרי לבבי קול צעדותיך!
חשקך ויום בו יהיו מתך,
נסעך בצאתך יצאה אחריך.
אם הזמן ישאל שאלותיך:
הפצך ואל־ארץ מברותיך!

מה לך צביה, תמנעי צריך
לא תדעי ב־אינ לדודך מזמן
אם הפרידה על־שנינו נגזרה,
לא אדעה אם בין צלעי נעצר
חי אהבה! זכרי ימי חשקך, כמו
באשר דמותך בחלומי יעבר,
ביני ובינך ים דמעות יהמו
אך לו פעמך לעברו קרבו,
לו אחרי מותי באוני יעלה
או תשאל לי־שלוש ידיך— משאול
אכן עלי שפךך דמי לבי שני
איך תאמרי "לא־כן" והם עדי עלי
מה־תחפצי מותי? והן אחפץ אני
אם־תגזלי נומי כליל חשקי הלא
מימי דמעות לחכה אשך וגם
באתי באש חשקך ומי בכי, אהה,
בין מר ומתוק יעמד לבי, והם:
אחרי דבריך בפחים רקעו
מראה דמות אדם עלי ספיר בעת
שמש בפניך, וליל תפרשי
משי ורקמה הם כסות גופך אבל
משכית עלמות מעשה יד־איש, ואת־
הרם וסחר, עש וכימה קנאו
בנים ובנות חשבו, אם חפשו,
לא־אשאלה מהון זמן חלקי לבר
יערי ודבשי בין שפתיך, כמו
שמתך כחותם על־ימיני, לו אני
אשבח ימיני משמאלי, יעלה,
המר נדד לבי בזכרי יערת
ריחי בריח מר־דרורך אמהלה,
הנה כבוד נשים תהלתן, ואת־
בשרה בנות־חשק אַלמות אהבה
מ־יתנני אחיה עד־אארה
לא־אשמעה קולך, אבל אשמע עלי
פקדי, ביום פקדך לחיות חללי
נפשי להשיב א־גזיתי, ביום
בשלוש ידיך, יעלת־חן שאלי
שובי, וצורנו ישיבך א־למחוז

Why, my darling, have you barred all news
From one who aches for you inside the bars of his own ribs?
Surely you know a lover's thoughts
Care only for the sound of your hellos!
At least, if parting was the fate reserved for us,
You might have lingered till my gaze had left your face.
God knows if there's a heart caged in these ribs
Or it has fled to join you in your journeys.

O swear by Love that you remember days of embraces
As I remember nights crammed with your kisses,
And that, as through my dreams your likeness passes,
So does mine through yours!
Between us lies a sea of tears I cannot cross,
Yet should you but approach its moaning waves,
They'd part beneath your steps,
And if, though dead, I heard the golden bells
Make music on your skirt, or your voice asking how I was,
I'd send my love to you from the grave's depths.

That you have shed my blood, I have two witnesses—
Your lips and cheeks. Don't say their crimson lies!
What makes you want to be my murderess
When I would only add years to your years?
You steal the slumber from my eyes,
Which, would it increase your sleep, I'd give you gratis.
My vaporous sighs are stoked by passion's flames,
And I am battered by your icy floes,
And thus it is that I am caught, alas,
Between fire and the flood, hot coals and cold deluges.
My heart, half sweetness and half bitterness,
Honeyed kisses mixed with hemlock of adieus,
Has been shredded by you into pieces,
And each piece twisted into curlicues.

Yet picturing your fairness—
The pearl-and-coral of your teeth and lips;
The sunlight in your face, on which night falls in cloudy tresses;
Your beauty's veil, which clothes your eyes
As you are clothed by silks and embroideries
(Though none's the needlework that vies with Nature's splendor, Nature's grace)—
Yes, when I think of all the youths and maidens
Who, though freeborn, would rather be your slaves,
And know that even stars and constellations
Are of your sisters and your brothers envious –
Then all I ask of Time's vast hoard is this:
Your girdled waist, the red thread of those lips
That were my honeycomb, and your two breasts,
In which are hidden myrrh and all good scents.

O would you wore me as a seal upon your arms
As I wear you on mine! May both my hands
Forget their cunning if I forget the days,
My dearest, of our love's first bliss!
Hard for the heart made vagrant are the memories
Of your ambrosia on my lips—but could I mix
My exhalations with their perfumed essence,
I would have a way to kiss you always.
Are women praised for their perfections?
Perfection in you is praised for being yours.
The fields of love have many harvesters—
And your harvest is bowed down to by their sheaves.
God grant that I may live to drain the lees,
Once more, of your limbs' sweet elixirs!
Although I cannot hear your voice,
I listen, deep within me, for your footsteps.
O on the day that you revive Love's fallen legions
Slain by your sword, think of this corpse
Abandoned by its spirit for your travels!
If life, my love, will let you have your wishes,
Tell it you wish to send a friend regards.
May it bring you to your destinations,
And God return you to your native grounds!

Moshe ibn Ezra had three brothers, Yehuda, Yitzhak, and Yosef. For a while in the early 12th century, all four lived in Toledo, the capital of Christian Castile, as did Halevi, who was practicing medicine there. Yehuda was the first of the Ibn Ezras to die, and this elegy that Halevi wrote for him begins with a pun, since *hevel*, the biblical word for “vanity,” is also the Hebrew name of the biblical Abel. (Literally, the poem’s first Hebrew distich reads, “Because it sees that man is *hevel*/ Time turns on him and becomes Cain.”) The next-to-last line is a barb aimed at Yosef, an official in the Castilian administration. Apparently having gone to see him on some matter following Yehuda’s death, Halevi was told that he was too busy to receive him.

רָאָה זְמַן בִּי הָאֲנוּשׁ הֶבֶל

On the Death of Yehuda ibn Ezra

רָאָה זְמַן בִּי הָאֲנוּשׁ הֶבֶל וְאִז
 נִהַפֵּךְ לְצַר עָלָיו וְהֵנוּ קַיִן,
 אֵךְ שֵׁת לְבָבוֹ לְהָרֵג בְּבָנֵי יֶקֶר
 וַיְהַרֵג כָּל מַחְמְדֵי עֵין.
 פָּרֵץ תְּמוּל פָּרֵץ בְּאַרְבַּעַת בָּנֵי
 עֲזָרָא וְהַמְתִּיק הֶבְכִי מִיָּין.
 אֶל הַשָּׁנִים הָרְחוּקִים אֶהְמָה
 בִּי אֶחָזָה יָמִים יִנִּיפּוֹן זֵין;
 אֲשַׁאל בְּעַד יוֹסֵף וַיֹּאמְרוּ לִי חֲפָה
 וּבְעַד יְהוּדָה יֹאמְרוּ לִי אֵין.

Because it sees man is but a vain thing,
 Time turns on him. Like Abel killed by Cain,
 It lays the splendor of our sons low
 And slays the darlings of our fancy.
 Souring our wine until our tears taste sweet,
 It has breached the Ibn Ezra's foursquare lines.
 For two of them, now far away, I pine,
 And for the days in which they won the palm;
 While asking for Yosef I'm told to wait,
 And for Yehuda, "He is gone."

ידענוך נדד מימי עלומים

A Lament for Moshe ibn Ezra

Moshe ibn Ezra left Toledo, under unclear circumstances, for a life of unhappy wandering in northern Spain. (It has been conjectured on the basis of a poem of his that he departed due to a family rift caused by his falling in love with his brother Yitzhak's daughter.) Although Halevi himself continued to live in Toledo for many more years, it was a city whose atmosphere and inhabitants he disliked. He never thought of it as a permanent home and, prior to developing a determination to settle in the Land of Israel, dreamed of returning to Andalusia. This mono-rhymed verse letter addressed by him to Moshe ibn Ezra is thus a lament for the transiency of both their lives. The poet's mining of "truth's storerooms for its rarest stones" is apparently a reference to the composition of *The Kuzari*, Halevi's great intellectual defense of Judaism, which he began to work on in his Toledan years.

I have not sought to reproduce this poem's monorhyme of –*im*. Its meter is the *shalem*. I have used a longer English line in translating it than I did with the same meter in "Why, My Darling, Have You Barred All News?", resulting in a mere 41 English lines for its 64 Hebrew distichs.

ידענוך נדד מימי עלומים,
ונחל הבכי נחל קדומים.
הרב עם הזמן על לא הטאה
ועם ימים ואין עון לימים?
פלכים הם בקו צדק ירוצו
ואין נפתל ועקש במרומים.
הזה חרש ואין תבל חרשה
וחקיה באצבע אל רשומים,
ואיך ישנו דבריה וכלם
בטבעת ימין עליון חתומים?
וכל סבה מצואה במסכה
וכל חרש כבר היה פעמים,
ולא חבר אנוש כי אם לפרד
להוציא מלאם אחד לאמים,
ולולא נפרדו מאז בני איש
אזי לא מלאה ארץ עממים.
ויש דבר אשר ייטב וירע
ובו שקוי ורקב לעצמים,
בהתקצף אנוש יומו יקלל
ויקב את רגעיו הזעומים
והוא היום יברכוהו אחרים
אשר אתו יכלו בנעימים.
וכל מאכל בפי בריא בנפת
והנפת בפי חלה רתמים,
ודאג יחשכו אורים בעיניו
ולא יראם והם לו נעלמים
בעיני יום שכן ענן עליהם
לנד משה והם ירדות זרמים.
מקור חכמה אשר אמצא בפיהו
מקום הפז ומחצב הפתמים.
ידידות קשרה נפשי בנפשו
בעוד רכבי נדד אינם רתומים,
בעוד לא נסתה נפשי פרידה
ואתנו בני ימים שלמים.
ילדונו בנות ימים פרדים
ובת אהבה ילדתנו תאומים,
אמנים על ערוגת הבשמים
וינקי שד שדי בת הפרמים.
זכרתיך עלי הרי בתרים;
תמול היו בך הרי בשמים,
ועפעפי מגוללים בדמעה
והדמעה מגוללה בדמים!
זכרתיך ונזפרתי לימים,
עברנומו והיו בחלמים.
המירך לי זמן בגד בכל איש
אשר לבו קרב ובפיו שלומים.
אדבר בם ואם אמצא בפייהם
תמורת מנך חציר ושומים.
חמסי וחמתי על פתאים
אשר המה בעיניהם חכמים,
אשר קראו לשקריהם אמונות
וקראו שם אמונתי קסמים,
אשר זרעו וקצרו שכליהם
ושמחו בם ואם המה צנמים,
וחצוני דבר חכמה חרשים
לכסות הפנינים הפנימים,
ולי גרות אחפש בם חדריו
ואוציא מגנזיו הלשמים,
וסכל כי יבקש סוד עניתיו
עלי אף החזיר מה לגזמים,
ואיך על לא מקום זרע אבקש
ענני לערף עליו גשמים?
וצרפי לזמן נקל ונדמה
כמו צרף נשמה לגשמים,
אשר מדי יכילוה תחים
ואם נלאו עזבתם צלמים.

Wander-life, you are an old friend—
And the River of Tears has flowed for long years.
Shall I quarrel with fate? But why fault what is fated?
Or with time that goes by? What else should time do!
Like a skein from the spindle it runs straight and true,
As does all made above. This may not be new;
But the world is not new and its laws are writ in God's hand.
How expect them to change when they all bear His stamp,
And all things run their course and each cause has its cause?
Men are joined in order to part—that's how differences start,
From which nations are born and the earth is peopled
with tribes.
Nothing is all good or bad; every potion is also a poison,
And the day cursed as paltry by one man, others praise for
its bounty.
A rich dish is a treat if you're well, hot coals in your mouth
when you're ill,
And so black is the sight of the man who is vexed that it
darkens all light,
As my eyes are clouded and wet because Moshe is gone.

The source of all wisdom, his words were pure nuggets
of gold!
Our friendship is old; it goes back to when no one
harnessed or rode
The wagons of wandering's road, and my soul
Was unpracticed at parting, and our days were
unfractured and whole.
Time bore us separately, but Love, which bore us twins,
Raised us in her spice garden and suckled us with
guzzled wines.
When I think of you, many mountains away (why,
just yesterday
You were my pleasure's peak!), the blood leaves my cheeks
For the tears running down them. I think—and remember
the days
That once were. Were we dreaming? What a traitor time is!
It has taken you from me and given me strife-minded men
Who pretend to be friends. The more their manners
Stink like garlic, the more I miss the manna of your speech.
Damn the fools who are so wise in their own eyes
That their own lies they deem the dogmas of true faith,
And my faith sorcery! They sew and reap empty ears and
call it grain;
With the exteriors of fashion they cover up the gems within.
But I will mine truth's storerooms for its rarest stones
And rest not till their sheaves bow down to mine.
“What? And cast my pearls before the swine?”
I'll say when they come knocking. “Why on seedless soil
Let fall my rain?” No, all I need from this poor age is what
my soul
Needs from my body: A place to live in while it lasts,
And to abandon when it topples and we leave.

הָהָ בְּתִי הַשְּׂכַחַת מִשְׁכָּנֶךָ

On the Death of a Daughter

הָהָ בְּתִי הַשְּׂכַחַת מִשְׁכָּנֶךָ
כִּי לִשְׂאוֹל נָסְעוּ נְשָׂאֵי אֲרוֹנְךָ?
וְאִין חֲלָקִי מִמֶּךָ רַק וְכְרוֹנְךָ,
וַאֲחֻזָּנְךָ אֶת עֲפָרוֹת צִיּוֹנְךָ
עַתָּה אֶסּוֹר לִשְׂאֹל שְׁלוֹמְךָ וְאִינְךָ,
כִּי הַמּוֹת יַפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבִינְךָ.

בֵּת מוֹצֵאת מִהֲדָר הוֹרְתָהּ,
אֵיךְ אַחִיָּה וּמִנְפָּשִׁי גִזְרְתָהּ?
צוּר אֶבֶקַע עַתָּה אֶרְאֶה צוֹרְתָהּ!
אֵיךְ תִּשְׁנֶה לְבָנָה מִהֲדָרְתָהּ
שֵׁם בִּשְׂאוֹל אֶרְאֶה יוֹם הַתְּנִיחָהּ?
אֵיךְ תִּשִּׁים גּוֹשׁ עֶפֶר הַפֶּתַח
וְאֵיךְ מִתְּקוּ לָהּ רַגְלֵי קְבוּרְתָהּ?
מָר לִי מָר בְּתִי עַל־הַסְרוּנֶךָ,
כִּי הַמּוֹת יַפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבִינְךָ.

שׁוֹשְׁנָה בְּלֹא עֵתָהּ נִקְטְפָה
אֲשֶׁר צִלְמָהּ בֵּין עֵינַי טֻטְפָה,
אֵיךְ דְּמָעָה בְּנֶהָר שֻׁטְפָה,
אֵיךְ בֵּת עֵשׂ בַּחִיק עֶפֶר נֶאֱסָפָה,
וְאֵיךְ חֲמָה בְּרָמָה מִתְּעַלְפָה,
וְחִבְלֵי שְׂאוֹל עַל רֹאשָׁהּ מִצְנָפָה?
הָהָ בְּתִי אִין דִּין לְמוֹזוֹר דִּינְךָ,
כִּי הַמּוֹת יַפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבִינְךָ.

קוֹל בְּחוּלָה שְׁמַעְתִּי לֵאמֹר שְׂכוּלָה.
הֲרִפָּה לָהּ כִּי נִפְשָׁה מָרָה לָהּ,
כִּי מוֹת בְּחִלּוּנִיָּה עָלָה.
עַם גִּזְרַת כְּבֹדָה כְּבוֹדָה גָּלָה,
וַיִּהְפֹּךְ שְׂמֻחָתָהּ לִילָלָה
יוֹם נֶעֱקְרָה גִּפְּזָה בִּלְבַב שְׂתוּלָה.
”מָה אֲזַעַק בְּתִי וְאֲזוֹנְךָ עֲרָלָה,
וְלַעֲנוּתִי מָלָה אִין בְּלִשׁוֹנְךָ,
כִּי הַמּוֹת יַפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבִינְךָ.

הָהָ בְּתִי הִכְרַעַת הִכְרַעְתָּנִי!
”אֲוִי אֲמִי אֲוִי לִי כִי יִלְדָתָנִי
אֵךְ הַיּוֹם אֵיךְ מְאוֹס מְאֻסְתָּנִי,
כִּי לְכָבוֹד מוֹת גִּדְּלָתָנִי,
כִּהְגִּיעַ תּוֹר לְנַפְשִׁי שְׁלַחְתָּנִי
וּבִעֲטָרְתָּ עֶפֶר עֲטָרְתָּנִי,
וּבְחִפְתָּ אֲבִדוֹן הוֹשְׁבָתָנִי.
בָּעַל כְּרִיחַךְ אֶמֶת כִּי לֹא בְרָצוֹנְךָ,
כִּי הַמּוֹת יַפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבִינְךָ.”

הַגִּזֹּר וְאִין מִפֶּר גִּזְרוֹתָיו
אֶת חֲבִלְךָ יִפִּיל בְּנַעֲיֻמוֹתָיו
וְרַב מִהֵיוֹת קִצְפוֹ עַל צְבָאוֹתָיו.
יִנְחֵם וְיַעֲצֹר מִגְּפוֹתָיו,
וְיִנְחֵם לִבָּב מְקוּרוֹתָיו.
לִקְץ יָמִין יִקְיֹצֶךָ בְּטֹל אוֹרוֹתָיו;
גַּם יִתְמַךְ בְּיָמִין צִדְקוֹ יְמִינְךָ,
כִּי הַמּוֹת יַפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבִינְךָ.

My child!
Had you forgotten the way
To your own home
That your pallbearers strayed
To the underworld's gloom,
Leaving me with
(Since you are not there
To ask how you are)
A grave's clods to kiss
And your memory?
Ah, death has come between you and me.

O daughter torn
From her mother's rooms!
What life have I left when,
Shaped from my soul,
She makes my tears flow
Like a spring from split stone?
How can she be so changed,
Once white as the moon,
That she now wears the earth
As her bridal gown,
Its sod the sweets
Of her wedding feast?
Bitter is my own misery,
For death has come between you and me.

Plucked like a flower
Before her time,
She always will be
Before my eyes
Like a frontlet.
Yet were I to cry
Whole rivers for her,
Still she would lie,
A fallen star
In a wormy pit,
Deep-sepulchered,
Earth-bonneted.
My child, there is no clemency,
For death has come between you and me.

Languishing,
Her mother's voice,
Bereft, I hear.
(Ah, let her be!
She too grieves bitterly.
Death scaled her walls,
And pierced her side,
And drove her pride
From its abode,
And turned her joy
Into a dirge
The day it ripped
The vine she planted
From her heart.)
“What good, my child,
Does it to cry your name?
Your ears are deaf
And you are silenced utterly,
For death has come between you and me.

Alas, my child,
You have laid me low!”
“O mother, O!
You should not have had me
If you meant to spurn me,
And when my turn came
To Death's minion to wed me,
And with dirt to wreath me
And cruelly lead me
Under doom's canopy.
Yet in truth you did not do it willingly,
For death has come between you and me.”

May He
Whose judgments
None repeal
Unseal your bonds
And heal your sleep
With angels' song,
And be not wroth
With His own flock
And stop the plague
That He sent forth,
And comfort every heart
For what it lost!
And may you wake
On the Last Day,
To light like dew,
And rise in the arms of His mercy,
For death has come between you and me.

In purely formal terms, this moving elegy written by Halevi for a teenage girl of marriageable age who died in an epidemic is unusual. Divided into six stanzas ranging from six to nine lines, each with its own separate mono-rhyme but all ending with the same refrain, it is written not in Arabic-style meter but according to the older Hebrew system of counting stressed syllables alone—in this case, four to the line. Three different voices speak in it: the dead girl's father's, her mother's, and her own. Each utters the refrain, which is taken from the Book of Ruth, where Ruth tells her mother-in-law Naomi: “Where thou diest I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do unto me accordingly if aught but death come between you and me.”

In all the biographical accounts of him, Halevi is mentioned as having had a single daughter, who bore him at least one grandson. The possibility that this poem is about the death of a second daughter, and that he himself is the speaker in it, has never been raised. Yet I believe that this was the case, and that a third child, a small boy, was probably mourned by him in yet another poem that he wrote.

Hispano-Hebrew poets sometimes signed their work by weaving their names into it. The initial letters of each stanza of this poem spell “Yehuda.” One of Halevi’s most anthologized poems, “Lord, Where Will I Find You?” deals with a central concern of his religious sensibility: the paradox of a transcendent and unknowable God who is nevertheless present in this world and “closer to man than his own skin and bone.” The “Creator of All” is the same God who was present in the Ark of the Covenant in the room of the Holy of Holies in the Temple. The poem is written in the form of what the Arabs called a *muwashah* or “girdle” poem. The “girdles” or stanzas are preceded by a “necklace,” an introductory distich that introduces a rhyme (*ne’elam/ olam*) that runs through the second and fourth “girdles” and ends the last two lines of all four. As in “On the Death of a Daughter,” the poem eschews Arabic-style metrics for the older Hebrew system that counts only the stressed syllables in each line.

יְהוָה אֵנָה אֲמָצְאָךְ?

Lord, Where Will I Find You?

יְהוָה אֵנָה אֲמָצְאָךְ? מְקוֹמְךָ נַעֲלָה וְנִעָלָם.
וְאֵנָה לֹא אֲמָצְאָךְ? כְּבוֹדְךָ מָלֵא עוֹלָם.

הַנִּמְצָא בַּקְרָבִים אֶפְסֵי אֶרֶץ הַקִּים.
הַמְשֻׁנָּב לְקְרוֹבִים, הַמְבֻטָּה לְרַחוּקִים.
אֶתָּה יוֹשֵׁב בְּרוֹבִים, אֶתָּה שׁוֹכֵן שְׁחָקִים.
תַּתְּהִלָּל בְּצַבְּאָךְ, וְאֶתָּה עַל רֹאשׁ מַהֲלָלָם.
גִּלְגֹּל לֹא יִשְׁאָךְ, אֵף כִּי חֲדָרֵי אוֹלָם.

וּבַהֲנִשְׁאָךְ עָלֵיהֶם עַל כֵּס נִשְׂא וְרֹם,
אֶתָּה קְרוֹב אֵלֵיהֶם מְרוּחָם וּמִבְשָׁרָם.
פִּיָּהֶם יַעֲדֵד בָּהֶם כִּי אֵין בְּלִתֶּךָ יוֹצֵרָם.
מִי זֶה לֹא יִרְאֶךָ?— וְעַל מַלְכוּתְךָ עֲלָם.
אוּ מִי לֹא יִקְרָאֶךָ?— וְאֶתָּה נוֹתֵן אֶכְלָם.

דִּרְשֵׁתִי קִרְבָּתְךָ, בְּכָל לֵבִי קִרְאֲתִיךָ,
וּבִצֵּאתִי לְקִרְאֲתְךָ לְקִרְאֲתִי מִצֵּאתִיךָ,
וּבִפְלֹאִי גְבוּרָתְךָ בְּקִדְשׁ חֲזִיתִיךָ.
מִי יֹאמֶר לֹא רָאֶךָ? הֵן שָׁמַיִם וְחֵילָם
יִגִּידוּ מוֹרָאֶךָ, בְּלִי נִשְׁמָע קוֹלָם.

הָאִמָּנָם כִּי יֵשֵׁב אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם?
וּמֶה יַחֲשֹׁב כָּל חוֹשֵׁב אֲשֶׁר בַּעֲפָר יְסוּדָם?
וְאֶתָּה קָדוֹשׁ יוֹשֵׁב תְּהִלּוֹתָם וּכְבוֹדָם.
חַיּוֹת יוֹדוּ פְּלִאָךְ הָעוֹמְדוֹת בְּרוֹם עוֹלָם.
עַל רֹאשֵׁיהֶם כְּסֹאֶךָ, וְאֶתָּה נוֹשֵׂא כָלָם.

Lord, where will I find You?
Your place is remote and concealed.
And where will I not find You?
Your being fills the world.

Creator of All, You are in all that is small.
To the far You are near, to the near You are here.
An ark was Your home—so is heaven’s dome:
Its Hosts sing Your praises and You are host to their clan.
The spheres cannot hold You, but a room can.

Alone and unknown, above on Your throne,
You are closer to man than his own skin and bone.
His words proclaim that it was You who made him.
Who does not know You? Your yoke is his guide.
Who does not pray to You to provide?

I have longed for Your presence, I have called You in Your absence,
As I set out to greet You I have found You come to meet me:
In Your holiness I saw You, in the wonder of Your glory.
Yet who has not seen You, if ever he saw,
In skies that are silent, stars loud with awe?

Did You truly decide to reside in man’s midst?
O let him but trust in that, made out of dust,
Though You dwell in solitude, sacred and blessed!
The seraphs extol You from their supreme height:
They carry Your seat—and You, the world’s weight.

נִמְתָּ וְנִרְדַּמְתָּ

The Dream

In the year 1130, the Hebrew year 4890, Yehuda Halevi, then a man in his late fifties, had a dream in which he saw the Jewish people “raised high” and the downfall of the Arabs, symbolized by Ishma’el—Hagar’s son and the biblical Isaac’s half-brother, called a “wild ass of a man” by the Bible. The Aramaic lines in the poem, which are retained untranslated in my English, come from the Book of Daniel, whose arcane prophecies were traditionally mined by Jews for their messianic hints. Daniel’s *pum memalel ravrevan*, “a high-and-mighty mouth,” was probably meant by Halevi to refer to the bombastic language of Muhammed in the Koran. *Hasaf tina be-raglei farzela*, “feet of iron mixed with clay,” is from the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of a “great image” or idol, interpreted by Daniel to represent the four evil kingdoms of history. *Avna di-mehat tsalma*, “the stone that smote the image,” signified for Halevi the smashing of the fourth, Islamic kingdom. I have sought to reproduce his pun on *tatat*, “890” (the Hebrew letters *taf, taf, and tsadi*, 400+400+90), and *tutatz*, “will be smashed” with “will end in naught,” in which “naught” also refers to the zero in 4890.

נִמְתָּ וְנִרְדַּמְתָּ וְהָרַד קִמְתָּ—
 מָה הַחֲלוֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר חֲלַמְתָּ?
 אוֹלֵי חֲלוֹמָךְ הָרָאךְ שׁוֹנֵאךְ
 בִּי דַל וְכִי שָׁפַל, וְאַתָּה רָמַתָּ.
 אִמְרוּ לְבֶן הָגָר: אֶסֶף יַד גָּאוֹה
 מִבֶּן גְּבֻרָתְךָ אֲשֶׁר זָעַמְתָּ!
 שָׁפַל רְאִיתִיךָ וְשׁוֹמֵם בַּחֲלוֹם;
 אוֹלֵי בְּהֻקֵּיךְ בֶּן בָּבֶר שְׂמַמְתָּ,
 וְשֵׁנָת תַּתִּיץ תַּתִּיץ לָךְ כָּל גָּאוֹה,
 תִּבּוֹשׁ וְתִחַפֵּר מֵאֲשֶׁר זָמַמְתָּ.
 הֵאֵת אֲשֶׁר נִקְרָא שְׂמֶךְ פָּרָא אֲנוּשׁ?
 מָה כְּבֹדָה יָרַךְ וּמָה עֲצַמְתָּ!
 הֵאֵת מְקֹרָא פֶסֶם מְמַלֵּל רַב־רֶבֶן
 וְאֲשֶׁר בְּקֻדִישִׁי זָבַל נִלְחַמְתָּ?
 הֵאֵת חֶסֶף טִינָא בְּרַגְלֵי פְרוּזָלָא
 בְּאַחֲרִית פֶּאֶת וְהִתְרוֹמַמְתָּ?
 אוֹלֵי נִגְנַף אֵל בְּאַכְנָא דִּי מַחַת
 צִלְמָא, וְשִׁלַּם לָךְ אֲשֶׁר הִקְדַּמְתָּ!

Heart pounding, you wake. Is it as it seemed?
 What is this dream that you have dreamed?

Did its vision truly show
 Yourself raised high and your foe laid low?

Tell Hagar’s son, then: “Cease to scorn
 The son of Sarah, higher born,

For in my dream you were undone.
 Has your doom so soon begun

That in the year 4890
 Your sway will end in naught also?

Proud tyrant! Assailant of Heaven! Are you not the one
 Called ‘wild ass of a man’ and *pum memalel ravrevan*,

The last to rise against God’s Law,
Hasaf tina be-raglei farzela?

Suppose He has struck you down with *avna di-mehat*
Tsalma, and paid you back for all that you begot!”

יְחִידָה, שִׁחְרֵי הָאֵל וְסָפִיו

Nishmat

יְחִידָה, שִׁחְרֵי הָאֵל וְסָפִיו, וְכִקְטָרֶת תְּנִי שִׁירְךָ בְּאַפִּיו:
הֲלֹא אִם תִּרְדְּפִי הַבְּלִי זְמַנְךָ, וְתֹאמְרִי כִי אֵמֶת הֵם כָּל בְּשָׁפִיו,
וְתִזְלִי אַחֲרָיו לֵילְךָ וְיוֹמְךָ וְתַעֲרֹב לְךָ תְּנוּמָה מִנְּשָׁפִיו,
דְּעִי כִי אֵין בְּיַדְּךָ מְאוּמָה אֲבָל עֵץ יִבְשׁוּ מִחֵר עֲנָפָיו.
הֵי לִפְנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּמִלֶּכְךָ אֲשֶׁר בָּאת לַחֲסוֹת תַּחַת בְּנָפִיו.
שְׁמוּ יִגְדֵּל וְיִתְקַדֵּשׁ בְּפִי כָל אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁמַת אֱלֹוֶה חֵי בְּאַפִּיו!

My soul!

Cross God's threshold at dawn and breathe to Him sweet-incensed song.
How long will you follow Time's follies and think that their witchcraft is truth,
Though days' and nights' revels and mornings slept softly away
Will soon leave you holding only the dead branch of a tree?
Shelter under the wing of your Lord and your King,
May his great name be praised by all that lives from His breath!

The preceding poems, with the exception of "Lord, Where Will I Find You?", would have been classified as *shirey hol*, "secular poems," by the standards of Hispano-Hebrew poetry, since none was intended to form part of the liturgy of a Jewish synagogue service. This poem and the three following ones would have been classified as *shirey kodesh* or "sacred poems," also known as *piyyutim*, because their purpose was liturgical. Each was meant to be sung by the cantor or prayer leader at a specific juncture—this "Nishmat" before the prayer in the morning service beginning, *Nishmat kol hai teva-rekh et shimkha adonai eloheynu*, "The breath of all that lives shall bless Your name, O Lord our God." The poem's last words, *asher nishmat eloha hai be'apav*, would have led directly into the *Nishmat* of the prayerbook. Prayer is depicted here by Halevi as a kind of divine circuitry in which God exhales the breath of life into the early morning worshiper and then re-inhales his own exhalation in the form of prayer.

The initial Hebrew letters of the first five distichs of this poem spell "Yehuda."

יְעִירוֹנִי בְּשִׁמְךָ רַעֲיוֹנִי

Barkhu

A *barkhu* is a *piyyut* preceding the invocation *Barkhu et adonai ha-mevorakh*, “Bless ye the Lord who is blessed,” which follows the *Nishmat kol hai*. This one describes the poet waking from a “vision” or dream of God, which, although not described, was clearly an intense experience. A “soft” mystic who never aspired, as more radical mystics do, to a waking union with the Divinity, Halevi nevertheless regarded his religious dreams as revelatory moments in which God appeared to him.

Once again, the first letters of this poem’s five distichs spell the name of the poet.

יְעִירוֹנִי בְּשִׁמְךָ רַעֲיוֹנִי וַיִּשְׁמּוּ חֲסִדֶיךָ לְפָנַי.
הִבִּינוֹנִי דְּבַר נֶפֶשׁ יִצְרָתָהּ קְשׁוּרָה בִּי – וְהִיא נִפְלְאָת בְּעֵינַי,
וְלִבִּי רָאָךְ וַיֵּאֱמֶן בְּךָ כְּאֵלּוּ מַעֲמַד הָיָה בְּסִינַי.
דְּרִשְׁתִּיךָ בְּחֲזִיוֹנִי וְעַבְרָה בְּבוֹדֶךָ בִּי וַיֵּרֶד בְּעֵנָנִי.
הִקִּימוֹנִי שְׁעָפִי מִיָּצוּעַי לְבָרְךָ שֵׁם בְּבוֹדֶךָ אֲדָנִי.

My thoughts of You wake me at night and I muse on Your kindness to me.
Through it I fathom the soul You have lodged in me, which yet is beyond me.
I see and believe in You in my heart as though Sinai rose over me.
I have sought You in visions and in their clouds Your glory swept down on me.
And I think: My Lord who is blessed, let me rise at day’s dawning to bless You!

יַעֲבֹר עָלַי רְצוּנָךְ

Ge'ula

A *ge'ula*, literally, a “redemption,” is a *piyyut* sung before the blessing *Barukh ata adonai, ga'al yisra'el*, “Blessed are you O Lord, who redeems Israel,” which comes in the section of the prayer between the *barkhu* and the Amidah. The theology of this *ge'ula* is conventional: inasmuch as God (characteristically described by Halevi as both near and far, “Ark-dwelling” and “looking down” from above) has not forgiven Israel for its sins, the chastisement of exile must be borne. Yet the final line hints at rebellion. One would have expected it to read, “Redeemer, look down on *Your* folk from *Your* place and redeem.” The unexpected “my” as though declares to God: “You say we are *Your* people—but you are in *Your* place and we are in ours, and from where we are, *Your* redemption is not discernible.”

The name Yehuda is woven into this *piyyut*, too.

יַעֲבֹר עָלַי רְצוּנָךְ	בְּאִשֶּׁר עָבַר חֲרוּנְךָ—
הִלְעוּלָמִים עוֹנִי	יַעֲמִד בֵּינִי וּבִינְךָ?
וְעַדִּי מִתִּי אֶבְקֶשׁ	אוֹתְךָ עָמִי— וְאֵינְךָ?
דֶּר בְּכַנְפֵי הַכְּרֻבִּים,	הַפְּרָשִׁים עַל־אֲרוֹנְךָ,
הַעֲבַדְתָּנִי לְזָרִים—	וְאַנִּי כֹנֶת יְמִינְךָ!
גֹּאֲלִי, לְגֹאֹל הַמּוֹנִי	רִם וְהַשְׁקֵף מִמַּעוֹנְךָ!

Your will be done until Your anger is gone.

Must I always be parted from You by my sin?

How long must I seek You and of You find no sign?

Why, O Ark-Dweller beneath cherubs' wings,

Have You enslaved me to strangers when You are mine?

Redeemer, look down on my folk from Your place and redeem!

יעלת־חן, ממעונה רחקה

Ahava

An *ahava* was a *piyyut* prefaced to the blessing of *Ohev amo yisra'el*, "Who loves His people Israel," which occurs in the service before the *Shma Yisra'el*. Like Halevi's *ge'ula*, this *ahava* touches on God's perceived abandonment of Israel, but from a different perspective. Here the stress is on His love. The "rare beauty" is the exiled Jewish people, while Edom is a rabbinic term for Christendom. Despite their degraded condition, this *ahava* affirms, the followers of Judaism can mock their Christian and Muslim rivals' pretensions in the confidence that they alone are God's true partner. No matter how long His quarrel with them lasts, He could no more lose His heart to the "low-born sows" (*pra'im* or "wild asses," in Halevi's Hebrew) who are vying with them than a king could choose a rude peasant girl over a princess.

The poem's last two lines invoke the verse in the Songs of Songs, "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the flood drown it." Such incorporation of biblical language for allusive purposes, known in Hebrew literary criticism as *shibutz* or "insetting," was a common technique in the Hispano-Hebrew poetry of Halevi's age.

יעלת־חן, ממעונה רחקה,
צחקה על בת־אדום ובנות ערב
הן פראים הם – ואיך ידמו אלי
אי נבואה, אי מנורה, אי ארון
אל־משנאי, אל־תכבו אהבה,
אוהבה בעס – ולמה צחקה?
המבקשות לחשק דוד חשקה!
יעלה על־הצבי התרפקה?
הברית, אי השכינה דבקה?
כי תכבוה והיא איש נשקה!

A rare beauty far from her place of high birth:

Why does she laugh when her true love is wroth?

She laughs at the daughters of Edom and at

Arabia's mignons and at the thought

That they covet her beau. Low-born sows!

Don't they know that she lay in his arms as his doe?

Where are their Prophets? Where their Menoráh?

Where their Holy Ark and Shekhináh?

Don't, my foes, don't hope to quench love's desire.

You will only be burned by love's fire.

יַעֲרוֹנִי רַעֲיוֹנִי

Waked By My Thoughts

A modified “girdle” poem (my translation retains its original rhyme scheme), “Waked By My Thoughts” compares God to a king in a cloud-moated castle to which the poet, likened to a slave, tearfully but boldly seeks admission. The tension climaxes in the fourth stanza, which starts with an appeal, borrowed from the imagery of romantic love, for dawn, the enemy of trysting lovers, to be delayed so that the petitioning slave can finish “pouring out” his “heart’s blood,” and ends with his gaining a seat at the king’s nocturnal table.

The image of “the king at his feast” is taken from the Song of Songs. A second biblical inset is “If He finds me proud”—in the Hebrew, “If my heart is lifted up in His eyes.” This comes from Ezekiel 28:2, which reads, “Son of man, say unto the prince of Tyre ... because thine heart is lifted up ... thou hast said, I am a God ... yet thou art a man and not God.” Although “Waked By My Thoughts” is one of the most mystical of Halevi’s poems, he was nevertheless, by means of this inset, disassociating himself from the radical goal of becoming God through mystical union with Him. While God is approachable when love overcomes fear, the nearer one draws to Him, the more conscious one is, for Halevi, of how far away He remains. This poem is a signed one.

יַעֲרוֹנִי רַעֲיוֹנִי	וְסוֹד לְבִי וּמִשְׁאָלוֹ,
הַגּוֹת דְּבָרֵי תַחֲנוּנִי	בְּזִמְרַת אֵל וּמִהָלָלוֹ,
וְלֹא אֶתֵּן שְׁנֵת לְעֵינִי	חַצוֹת לַיְלָה בְּגִלְלוֹ,
לַחֲזוֹת בְּנַעֲס־אֲדָנִי	וּלְבַקֵּר בְּהִיכָלוֹ!
הַקִּיצְתִּי וְאַחֲשֵׁב:	מִי הוּא אֲשֶׁר הִקְיַצְנִי?
וְהִנֵּה קְדוֹשׁ יוֹשֵׁב	תְּהַלּוֹתָיו הֵאִיצְנִי,
וְנָתַן בְּאָזְנִי קֶשֶׁב,	וְחִזְקִנִי וְאַמְצָנִי,
וְכָל־עוֹד רוּחִי הָשֵׁב	אַבְרָךְ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲצָנִי
צוּר, אֲשֶׁר הִנָּשְׁמָה לוֹ	וְהִגּוֹיָה מִפְּעָלוֹ!
וְאֶתְפַּלֵּל לְפָנָיו—	וּבִתְפִּלָּה אֶתְעַנֵּג,
וּבִקְעוֹ דְּמָעֵי עֲנָנָיו—	וּמִתְקוֹ מִצּוֹף וּפָנֵג,
וְגִבָּה לְבִי בְּעֵינָיו,	בָּעֵת נָמַס בְּדוֹנָג,
בְּעֶבֶד לְפָנָי אֲדָנִי	מִפֶּחַדוֹ יִתְמוּגָג,
וְכִי יִזְכֹּר מַחְמָלוֹ	יִנָּשֶׂה אֶת־כָּל־עֲמָלוֹ!
דוֹם לַיִל וְהִכְבֵּד	וְאַחֵר שֹׁחַר מְבוֹא,
עַד־יִתְרַצֶּה עֶבֶד	בְּתַחֲנוּנָיו אֶל־רִבּוֹ,
וְיִשְׁפֹּךְ דָּם לֵב וְכִבֵּד,	וְיִגִּיד נִגְעֵי לִבּוֹ,
וְיִתְיַחַד הָעֶבֶד	עַם־הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּמִסְבּוֹ,
וְיִשִּׁיר וְיִשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ	לִישׁ דִּגְלוֹ וּמִגְדָּלוֹ!
הִנֵּה עֶבֶד עֲבָדִים	לְפָנָי מֶלֶךְ מְלָכִים
עֹמֵד, וְיָדָיו כְּבִידִים	וְדִמְעָיו נִהְלָכִים—
לֵךְ יִצְרִי נְעֻבָּדִים	בְּעוֹד חַיִּי נִמְשָׁכִים,
וְכָל־אַבְרָיו מוֹדִים	וּמִתְוָדִים וּמִכְרָכִים,
סֶלַח לְרַע מַעֲלָלוֹ,	אֲשֶׁר בַּחוּל מִשְׁקָלוֹ!

Waked by my thoughts and driven to profess
God’s praise in song and plead my neediness,
I from my eyes brush midnight’s sleepiness
To seek the pleasance of the Lord’s palace.

Roused from drowsiness, I ask: Who stirred me?
The holy dweller in glory has spurred me.
He has taught me to listen; stood by me and beside me;
To my undying thankfulness, advised me.
All souls are His, all forms bear His impress!

To Him I pray—and rapt is my prayer.
Its tears pierce His clouds and are sweeter than nectar.
If He finds me proud, my heart is like butter,
Melting with fear like a slave’s of his master.
May love make him forget his distress!

Stay, solemn night! Let dawn wait in the east
Till the vassal who offers his heart’s blood has ceased
Pouring it out and his lord is appeased,
And the slave is alone with the king at his feast,
Pledging his flag in his fortress!

A slave of slaves before the King of Kings!
With heavy hands and many tears he brings
His life and limbs as Your sworn underlings
To bless You and confess You in all things.
Forgive like so much sand his sinfulness!

אֲדֹנִי, נִגְדֶּךָ כָּל תַּאֲוָתִי

Lord, You Are My Sole Desire

Toward the end of his long stay in Toledo, Yehuda Halevi underwent what today might be called a mid-life crisis. The sense that time was running out and that, despite all his poetic achievements, something of ultimate importance had been left undone began to take hold of him. All the honors and adulation that were his merely weighed on him. Growing old, for most people a process of accommodation to who they are, had become for him the anxiety of who he still was not.

“Lord, You Are My Sole Desire” is an expression of this state. The poem begins with a declaration of extreme religious devotion coupled with a fatigue so great that it is couched as an open death wish; pulls back from this brink with the reflection that, despite the poet’s sense of having lived enough, he is unprepared to cast off a world in which he has not yet fulfilled, or even clarified, his true mission; and ends with the confession that this failure makes him as frightened as the next man of the death he thought he had longed for. The stage for a radical decision was being set.

אֲדֹנִי, נִגְדֶּךָ כָּל תַּאֲוָתִי
וְאִם לֹא אֶעֱלֶנָּה עַל שִׁפְתִּי.
רְצוֹנְךָ אֲשַׁאלָה רַגַע וְאֶגּוּעַ—
וּמִי יִתֵּן וְתִבּוֹא שְׂאֵלָתִי,
וְאֶפְקִיד אֶת שְׁאֵר רוּחִי בְיָדְךָ
וְיִשְׁנֶנָּתִי, וְעֶרְבָה לִי שְׁנָתִי.
בְּרַחֲקֵי מִמָּךְ מוֹתִי בְחַיִּי,
וְאִם אֲדַבֵּק בְּךָ חַיִּי בְּמוֹתִי.
אֲכַל לֹא אֲדַעַה בְּמָה אֶקְדָּם,
וּמָה תִּהְיֶה עֲבוּדָתִי וְדָתִי.
דִּרְכֶּיךָ, אֲדֹנִי, לְמַדְנִי,
וְשׁוּב מִמַּאֲסֵר סִכְלוֹת שְׁבוּתִי,
וְהוֹרְנִי בְּעוֹד יֵשׁ בִּי יִכְלֹת
לְהִתְעַנּוֹת, וְאֵל תִּבְּזֶה עֲנוּתִי
בְּטָרֶם יוֹם אֶהְיֶה עָלַי לְמִשְׁא,
וְיוֹם יִכְבֹּד קִצְתִּי עַל קִצְתִּי,
וְאֶפְנֶעַ בְּעַל בְּרַחֲמֵי, וְיֹאכַל
עֲצָמֵי עֵשׂ, וְנִלְאוּ מִשְׁאָתִי,
וְאֶסַּע אֶל מְקוֹם נִסְעוּ אֲבוֹתִי,
וּבְמְקוֹם תַּחֲנוּנוֹתַם תַּחֲנֶנָּתִי.
בְּגֵר תּוֹשֵׁב אֲנִי עַל גִּב אֲדָמָה,
וְאוֹלָם כִּי בְּבִטְנָה נִחַלְתִּי.
נְעוּרַי עַד הֵלֶם עָשׂוּ לְנַפְשָׁם,
וּמָתִי גַם אֲנִי אֶעֱשֶׂה לְבֵיתִי?
וְהָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר נָתַן בְּלִבִּי
מִנְעֵנִי לְבִקֵּשׁ אַחֲרֵיתִי.
וְאֵיכָה אֶעֱבֹד יוֹצְרִי בְּעוֹדִי
אֶסִּיר יוֹצְרִי וְעֹבֵד תַּאֲוָתִי?
וְאֵיכָה מַעֲלָה רָמָה אֶבְקֵשׁ
וּמַחֲרֵר תִּהְיֶה רָמָה אַחוֹתִי?
וְאֵיךְ יִיטֵב בְּיוֹם טוֹבָה לְבָבִי
וְלֹא אֲדַע הֵיטֵב מִחֲרָתִי?
וְהַיָּמִים וְהַלֵּילוֹת עֶרְבִים
לְכָלוֹת אֶת שְׁאָרִי עַד כְּלוּתִי,
וְלָרוּחַ יִזְרוֹן מִחֲצִיתִי,
וְלַעֲפָר יִשְׁכּוֹן מִחֲצִיתִי.
וּמָה אֶמַּר, וְיוֹצְרִי יִרְדְּפֵנִי
כְּאוֹיֵב מִנְּעוּרִי עַד כְּלוּתִי?
וּמָה לִּי בְּזִמָּן אִם לֹא רְצוֹנְךָ?
וְאִם אֵינְךָ מְנַתִּי, מָה מְנַתִּי?
אֲנִי מִמַּעֲשִׂים שׁוֹלָל וְעָרֹם,
וְצִדְקָתְךָ לְבִדָּה הִיא כְּסוּתִי.
וְעוֹד מָה אֲאַרְיֶךְ לְשׁוֹן וְאֲשַׁאֵל?
אֲדֹנִי נִגְדֶּךָ כָּל תַּאֲוָתִי.

Lord, You are my sole desire,
Though I keep it my soul’s secret.
Could I but do Your will and die
That moment, I would seek it.
Placing in Your hands my spirit,
I would sleep—and sweet such sleep is.
Far from You, all life is dying;
Death is life with You beside me.

And yet I know not how to further
Most my faith or best to serve it.
Instruct me in Your ways, then, Lord,
And free my mind from folly’s service.
Teach me while I have strength to suffer,
Nor despise my suffering
In the time still left before,
Myself a burden to myself,
My cankered bones fail to support me
And, my only choice submission,
I make the voyage to my fathers,
Stopping to rest at their last stop
Deep in the earth, I who once was
A sojourner upon its surface.

My young years thought of naught save themselves.
When will my world-sated soul save itself?
How worship my Maker when all He has made
Makes me passion’s captive and slave,
Or strive for the heights when at the day’s end
Sister worm awaits my descent?
How, even, be glad in glad times,
When none know what the future will spell,
And the days underwrite my decay
With the nights, half of me to dispel
To the wind and half to the dust?
What can I plead when I am pursued
By my lust from my youth to my wane?
What of this world but Your will is my share,
And if You are not mine what is mine?
What more can I ask or declare?
I am naked of deeds, Your justice my only attire.
Lord, You are my sole desire.

Most likely it was sometime after the Crusader conquest of Jerusalem in 1099 that Halevi had the dream described in this poem, in which he took part in the ancient Temple sacrifices and listened to the song of the Levites. Since he was a Levite and “singer” himself, his dream was also about his own sense of religious and literary vocation.

“In the Temple” also has another dimension. We have seen how Halevi both struggled with, and delighted in, the paradox of a God who created the world from without yet dwelt within His creation. Though how this could be was a conundrum that human reason could not resolve, God’s “nearness” in Halevi’s dream is as “clear as things seen.” What is unknowable to the intellect, “In the Temple” proclaims, can nevertheless be grasped by direct experience.

If we look at the remarkable sequence of poems about Jerusalem and the Land of Israel that came to be known to posterity as Yehuda Halevi’s *shirey tsiyon*, his “songs of Zion,” “Your Dwellings, Lord” was probably the first of them. This is because, unlike the others, it does not express the thought or hope of actually going to live in the Land of Israel—a hope that, for Halevi, came as a response to the crisis described in “Lord, You Are My Sole Desire.” It is as if when Halevi wrote ‘Your Dwellings, Lord’ such a hope did not yet exist—or, going a step farther, as if the hope were engendered by the dream

אֱלֹהִי! מִשְׁכְּנוֹתֶיךָ יְרִידוֹת

In the Temple

אֱלֹהִי! מִשְׁכְּנוֹתֶיךָ יְרִידוֹת,
 וְקִרְבָּתְךָ בְּמִרְאָה, לֹא בְּחִידוֹת.
 הִבֵּיאֲנִי חֲלוּמֵי מִקְדָּשֵׁי אֵל,
 וְיִשְׁרָתִי מִלְּאֲכוֹתָיו הַחֲמוּדוֹת,
 וְהָעוֹלָה וּמִנְחָתָהּ וְנִסְכָּהּ,
 וְסָבִיב תִּימְרוֹת עֶשֶׂן כְּבִידוֹת.
 וְנִעְמָתִי בְּשִׁמְעֵי שִׁיר לְוִיִּם
 בְּסוּדֵיהֶם לְסֹדֶר הָעֲבוּדוֹת.
 הִקְיִצוֹתִי, וְעוֹדֵי עֶמֶךָ אֵל,
 וְהוֹדִיתִי, וְלֶךְ נָאָה לְהוֹדוֹת.

Your dwellings, Lord, are places of love,
 And Your nearness is clear as things seen,
 not guessed of.

My dream took me to Your Temple’s mount to sing
 In all its lovely worshiping and bring
 My offerings with their libations.

Around me swirled thick smoke and ministrations,
 Sweet to my ears, of Levites at their stations.
 I woke, but when I did You still were there
 For me to thank You as befits my prayer.

לבי במזרח

My Heart in the East

לְבִי בַּמִּזְרָח וְאַנְכִי בְּסוֹף מַעֲרָב.
 אֵיךְ אֶטְעֶמָה אֶת אֲשֶׁר אֶכֶּל וְאֵיךְ יַעֲרֵב?
 אֵיכָּה אֲשַׁלֵּם נְדָרֵי וְאַסְרֵי, בְּעוֹד
 צִיּוֹן בְּחֶבֶל אֲדוֹם וְאֲנִי בְּכַבֵּל עָרֵב?
 יִקַּל בְּעֵינַי עֲזוֹב כָּל טוֹב סִפְרָד, כְּמוֹ
 יִקַּר בְּעֵינַי רְאוֹת עֲפָרוֹת דְּבִיר נְהָרֵב.

My heart in the East
 But the rest of me far in the West—
 How can I savor this life, even taste what I eat?
 How, in the bonds of the Moor,
 Zion chained to the Cross,
 Can I do what I've vowed to and must?
 Gladly I'd leave
 All the best of grand Spain
 For one glimpse of the ruined Shrine's dust.

"My Heart in the East" is probably the best-known and most translated of all Halevi's poems. In formal terms, it is easily described. Its three 28- or 29-syllable distichs have the meter, known as the *mitpashetet*, long-long-short-long, long-short-long, long-long-short-long, long-short-long. The poem has the mono-rhyme of -rav. It has one pun, a double play on *hevel*, "domain," but also "rope," and *khevel*, "chain," and three phonetically linked pairs of words: *mizrah*, "East," and *ma'arav*, "West," *yeykal*, "it would be little," and *yeykar*, "it would be precious," and *tuv s'farad*, "the goodness of Spain," and *d'vir neherav*, "the Shrine [i.e., Temple] in ruins."

All this is cut-and-dried. Yet, describing the conflict of a man who has decided to journey to Crusader-ruled Palestine and live there, yet who is frighteningly aware of the difficulties of doing so, "My Heart in the East" is a living poem. Indeed, it is a perfect one, a miniature marvel of balance in which opposites tug in different directions while remaining musically joined.

יפה נוף, משוש תבל

To Jerusalem

In this poem, the dust of Jerusalem's ruins that the poet sought a mere glimpse of in "My Heart in the East" is imagined as a more intense sweetness, the taste of a lover's kiss. Indeed, "To Jerusalem," with its beauteous queen banished from her "cloister" of the Temple, has the motifs of a romantic love poem. Its pining lover; its beloved he has been torn from by a cruel fate; its hope for a blissful reunion with her—all are met with often in the medieval poetry of the troubadours and in romances like *Tristan and Isolde*. In many of Halevi's "songs of Zion," of which this is one of the most consummate, one finds, uniquely, the themes of romantic love fully integrated with the theme of Jewish exile and the yearning for an end to it.

יפה נוף, משוש תבל, קריה למלך רב!
 לך נכספה נפשי מפאתי מערב.
 המון רחמי נכמר בי אזכרה קדם,
 כבודך אשר גלה ונוך אשר חרב.
 ומי יתנני על פנפי נשרים עד
 ארוה בדמעתי עפרך ויתערב!
 דרשתיך ואם מלכך אין בך, ואם במקום
 צרי גלעדך נחש שרף וגם עקרב,
 הלא את אבניך אחנן ואשקם,
 וטעם רגביך לפי מדבש יערב.

O fair of view! World's joy! Great monarch's home!
 For you, from earth's far end, my spirit yearns.
 Compassion stirs in me when my mind turns
 To your lost cloister and its splendor's doom.
 Would that on an eagle's wings I flew
 To mix the water of my tears with your parched clay!
 Always I think of you—and though your king's away,
 And snakes and scorpions scuttle where once grew
 Your balm of Gilead, your stones and earth
 Would taste when kissed like honey in my mouth.

צִיּוֹן הֲלֵא תִשְׁאַלִי לְשָׁלוֹם אֶסִירֶיךָ

Zion, Do You Wonder?

“Zion, Do You Wonder?” is another of Halevi’s best-known poems, one familiar to many Jews from the book of lamentations for Tisha b’Av, the day of mourning for the destruction of the Temple. Yet despite its inclusion there by Jewish tradition, it was not originally written for liturgical use and would have been considered a “secular” rather than a “sacred” poem by Halevi’s contemporaries.

Indeed, the poem that “Zion, Do You Wonder?” most has to be read in conjunction with is “Why, My Darling, Have You Barred All News?” Like it—and unlike anything else Halevi ever wrote—the 34 distichs of “Zion, Do You Wonder?” have the haunting mono-rhyme of “–ayikh,” and like it, too, they follow the same progression of emotions from bereaved longing to bitter grief to hope for love’s restoration. In composing this, the greatest of his songs of Zion, Halevi was clearly aware of having modeled it on the greatest of his love poems.

As in my translation of “Why, My Darling, Have You Barred All News?”, I have substituted a final “s” sound for Halevi’s mono-rhyme. The poem’s Hebrew meter is the *mitpashetet*, for which I have once again fallen back on an English iambic line.

צִיּוֹן הֲלֵא תִשְׁאַלִי לְשָׁלוֹם אֶסִירֶיךָ,
דּוֹרְשֵׁי שְׁלוֹמְךָ וְהֵם יֵתֶר עֲדֶרְיֶיךָ?
מִיָּם וּמִזֶּרֶחַ וּמִצָּפוֹן וּתְיִמָּן שְׁלוֹם
רְחוֹק וְקָרוֹב שְׂאִי מִכָּל עֲבָרֶיךָ,
וּשְׁלוֹם אֶסִיר תֵּאוּחַ, נוֹתֵן דְּמָעָיו כְּטֹל—
חֶרְמוֹן וְנֶכְסֶף לְרֹדְתָם עַל הָרְרֶיךָ.
לְכִכּוֹת עֲנוּתֶךָ אֲנִי תִנִּים וְעֵת אַחֲלֵם
שִׁיבֵת שְׁבוּתֶךָ אֲנִי כְּנוֹר לִשְׁרִיֶּיךָ.
לְכִי לְבֵית אֵל וּלְפָנַיִל מְאֹד יִהְיֶה
וּלְמַחֲנִים וְכָל פְּגָעֵי טְהוֹרֶיךָ,
שֵׁם הַשְּׂכִינָה שְׁכָנָה לָךְ וְהַיּוֹצֵרְךָ
פָּתַח לְמוֹל שְׁעָרֵי שַׁחַק שְׁעָרֶיךָ,
וּכְבוֹד יְיָ לְבַד הִיָּה מְאֹרֶךְ וְאֵין
שֶׁמֶשׁ וְסֶהַר וְכוֹכָבִים מְאִירֶיךָ.
אַבְחַר לְנַפְשִׁי לְהִשְׁתַּפֵּךְ בְּמָקוֹם אֲשֶׁר
רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים שְׁפוּכָה עַל בְּחִירֶיךָ.
אֶת בֵּית מְלוּכָה וְאֶת כֶּסֶף יְיָ וְאֵם
יֵשְׁבוּ עֲבָדִים עָלַי כְּסֹאוֹת גְּבִירֶיךָ.
מִי יִתְּנֵנִי מְשׁוּטֵט בְּמִקְוֹמוֹת אֲשֶׁר
נִגְלוּ אֱלֹהִים לְחוּזֶיךָ וְצִירֶיךָ!
מִי יַעֲשֶׂה לִי כְּנָפִים וְאַרְחִיק נֹדֶד
אֲנִיד לְכַתְּרִי לְכַבִּי בֵּין בְּתָרְיֶיךָ!
אֶפֶל לְאַפִּי עָלִי אֶרְצֶךָ וְאַרְצָה אֶכ־
נֶיךָ מְאֹד וְאַחֲזֵן אֶת עַפְרֶיךָ,
אֶף כִּי בְּעַמְדִּי עָלִי קְבֻרוֹת אֲבֹתִי וְאַש־
תוֹמֵם בְּחֶבְרוֹן עָלִי מְבַחַר קְבָרֶיךָ.
אֶעֱבֹר בְּיַעֲרֶךָ וּבְרִמְלֶךְךָ וְאֶעֱמֵד בְּגִל־
עֲדָךְ וְאֶשְׁתַּוְּמַמָּה אֶל הָר־עֲבָרֶיךָ,
הָר־הָעֲבָרִים וְהָר הָהָר אֲשֶׁר שֵׁם שְׁנֵי
אוֹרִים גְּדוֹלִים מְאִירֶיךָ וּמוֹרֶיךָ.
חַיֵּי נְשָׁמוֹת אוֹרֵי אֶרֶץ וּמִמְרָדְדוֹר
אַבְקַת עַפְרֶךָ וְנִפְתַּת צוּף נְהָרֶיךָ.
יִנָּעַם לְנַפְשִׁי הַלּוֹךְ עֵרֶם וְיַחַף עָלִי
חֲרִבוֹת שְׁמָמָה אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ דְּבִירֶיךָ,
בְּמָקוֹם אֲרוֹנְךָ אֲשֶׁר נִגְנְזוּ וּבְמָקוֹם כְּרוֹד
בֵּיךְ אֲשֶׁר שְׁכָנוּ חֲדָרֵי חֲדָרֶיךָ.
אֲגֹז וְאֶשְׁלִיךְ פֶּאֶר נֹזֵר וְאֶקַּב זֶמֶן
חֵלֶל בְּאֶרֶץ טִמְאָה אֶת־נְזִירֶיךָ.
אֵיךְ יַעֲרֹב לִי אֶכּוֹל וּשְׁתוֹת בְּעֵת אֲחִיזָה
כִּי יִסְחָבוּ הַכְּלָבִים אֶת כְּפִירֶיךָ?
אוֹ אֵיךְ מְאוֹר יוֹם יִהְיֶה מְתוֹק לְעֵינַי בְּעוֹד
אֶרְאֶה בְּפִי עֲרָבִים פְּגָרֵי נִשְׁרֶיךָ?
כּוֹס הַיְּגוֹנִים לֹאֵט הִרְפִּי מַעַט כִּי כָּבֹד
מָלְאוּ כֶסֶלִי וְנַפְשִׁי מִמְרוֹרֶיךָ!
עַתָּה אֲזַכְּרָה אֶהְלֶה אֶשְׁתַּה חֲמַתְךָ וְאֲזַכֹּר
אֶהְלִיבָה וְאֶמְצָה אֶת־שְׁמֶרְיֶיךָ!
צִיּוֹן כְּלִילַת יָפִי, אֶהְבֶּה וְחֵן תִּקְשְׁרִי
מֵאֶז וּבָךְ נִקְשְׁרוּ נַפְשוֹת חִבְרֶיךָ,
הֵם הַשְּׂמִיחִים לְשִׁלּוּתְךָ, וְהַכְּאֵבִים
עַל שׁוֹמְמוּתְךָ, וּבּוֹכִים עַל שְׁבָרֶיךָ.
מִבּוֹר שְׁבִי שׁוֹאֲפִים נִגְדָּךְ וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוִים
אִישׁ מִמָּקוֹמוֹ אֵלַי נִכַּח שְׁעָרֶיךָ,
עֲדָרֵי הַמוֹנֶךָ אֲשֶׁר גָּלוּ וְהִתְפָּזְרוּ
מִהָר לְגִבְעָה וְלֹא שָׁכְחוּ גִדְרֶיךָ,
הַמַּחֲזִיקִים בְּשׁוּלִיךְ וּמִתְאַמְצִים
לְעִלּוֹת וּלְאַחֵז בְּסִנְסָנֵי תִמְרֶיךָ.
שֶׁנֶּעַר וּפְתָרוֹס הִיעֲרִכּוּךָ בְּגִדְלָם וְאֵם
הַבֶּלֶם יְדַמוּ לְתַמְיָךְ וְאוֹרֶיךָ?
אֵל מִי יְדַמוּ מִשְׁחִיחֶיךָ וְאֵל מִי נָבִי—
אֵיךְ וְאֵל מִי לוֹוֶיךָ וְשָׂרֶיךָ?
יִשְׁנֶה וְיַחְלֹף כְּלִיל כָּל מַמְלָכוֹת הָאֵלֶּלִיל,
חֲסִנְךָ לְעוֹלָם לְדוֹר וְדוֹר נְזִירֶיךָ.
אֲנִי לְמוֹשֵׁב אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְאַשְׁרֵי אֲנוֹשׁ
יִבְחַר יִקְרַב וְיִשְׁכֵּן בְּחֻצְרֶיךָ!
אַשְׁרֵי מַחֲבֶה וְיַגִּיעַ וְיִרְאֶה עֲלוֹת
אוֹרֶךְ וּבִקְעוּ עָלָיו שְׁחָרֶיךָ,
לְרֹאוֹת בְּטוֹבַת בְּחִירֶיךָ וּלְעֹלֹ בְּשֶׁם—
חֲתִיךָ בְּשׁוּבְךָ אֵלַי קִדְמַת נְעוּרֶיךָ.

Zion! Do you wonder how and where your captives
Are now, and if they think of you, the far-flocked
remnants?
From north and south, east, west, and all directions,
Near and far, they send their greetings
As I send mine, captured by my longings
To weep like Hermon’s dew upon your mountains.
Mourning your lowliness, I am the wail of jackals;
Dreaming your sons’ return, the song of lute strings.
My heart stirs for Peniel, and for Bethel, and all
those places
With their pure traces of God’s presence, where
your gates,
Facing the portals of the highest heavens,
Stand opened by your Maker. You He illumines
Not with the sun, or moon, or stars, but with
the rays
Of His own glory. Gladly I would choose
To pour my soul out where your chosen ones
Stood in a downpour of God’s effluence.
You are the throne of the Lord, His royal house—
How then are slaves enthroned in your lords’
houses?
If only I could wander past the way points
Where God appeared to your appointed and
your seers,
And, flying to you with a bird’s wings,
Shake woeful head, remembering the throes
Of your dismemberment, my face
Pressed to your earth, cherishing its soil and
stones—
Yes, even so, the graves of patriarchs.
Wondrous in Hebron at your choicest tombs,
I would cross Gilead, and Carmel’s woods,
And stop to marvel at your lofty peaks
Across the Jordan, on which, illustrious,
Lie buried the two greatest of your teachers.
Your very air’s alive with souls;
Your earth breathes incense and your rivers
Run with balm. I would rejoice
To walk with my bare feet, in tatters,
Upon the ruins of your Sanctuaries,
In which, before it was removed from us,
The Holy Ark stood guarded by its Cherubs
Posted at the innermost of chambers—
And then, all worldly pomp cast off, I’d curse
The fate that did defile your peerless pilgrims.
How could I eat or drink, seeing the dogs
Make off with the remains of your proud lions?
How find the daylight sweet when my two eyes
Were forced to witness crows feast on your eagles?
Enough, desist from me, O cup of sorrows,
Drained to the dregs of all its bitterness!
Zion! God’s love, combined with Beauty’s grace,
Has bound to you the souls of all your friends,
So that they joy when you’re at peace
And weep when you’re all wounds and wilderness.
Imprisoned, they yearn for you, each from his place
Turning to bow in prayer to your gates—
Your many flocks, dispersed to distant hills
Yet ever mindful of their vows
To re-ascend to you and reach your heights,
As the palm tree, rising above all else,
Is scaled by the bold climber. Who compares
To you? Not ancient Babylon, nor Greece:
What are all their empty oracles
Beside your Prophets and the breastplates of
your priests?
The heathen kingdoms lapse, collapse, and pass,
But you remain forever, crowned for the ages.
God makes His home in you: Blesséd are those
Who dwell with Him, residing in your courts.
Blesséd is he who comes, and waits, and sees
The rising sun illuminate your dawns,
In which your steadfast share the happiness
Of your lost youth, restored as it once was.

הַתְּרַדֵּף נַעֲרוֹת אַחֵר חֲמִשִּׁים?

A Man in Your Fifties

Yehuda Halevi was in his fifties from the early 1120s to the early 1130s, and while the idea of leaving Spain for the Land of Israel increasingly preoccupied him during this period, he repeatedly put off its implementation. As the friends who urged him to abandon it kept reminding him, Crusader Palestine was a war zone, its Jewish population decimated by its Christian conquerors. Mediterranean travel was dangerous, and even if he arrived safely, Halevi, a lionized figure in Spain, would have nothing but a life of social and cultural isolation to look forward to. The entire plan seemed like madness. Halevi hesitated—and castigated himself for doing so. The perilous sea voyage imagined in this poem is a metaphor for the entire project of settling in Palestine. The poem can be read as a waking dream in which the poet masters his anxiety by letting the worst happen in his thoughts, so that his heart beats as wildly as a ship tossing in high seas and then, the winds subsiding as he regains control of his fears and his breathing becomes regular again, reassuringly slows to the steady pulse of the certitude of being in God’s hands.

וַיִּמְיֹךְ לְהִתְעוֹפֵף חֲמִשִּׁים! וּתְכַסֶּף אֶל־עֲבֹדַת הָאֲנָשִׁים, פָּנִי אֶחָד לְכָל־חֶפֶץ דְּרוֹשִׁים, וּתְמַכֵּר חֶלְקְךָ בְּנוֹיֵד עֲדָשִׁים; וּתְאַוֶּתָה תִּבְכֹּר לַחֲדָשִׁים? וְסוּר מֵעַל חֲמִשַּׁת הָרְגָשִׁים, יְמוּתֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר אֲצִים וְחָשִׁים, וְאֶל־תִּלְדֶּךָ לֶךְ לִקְרֹאת נְחָשִׁים; וְקַל בְּצַבִּי וְגִבּוֹר בְּלִישִׁים, וְהָרִים תַּחֲזֶה מָטִים וּמָשִׁים, וְהַכְּמִי הַחֲרָשִׁים מַחְרִישִׁים, וְשָׁבִים אֶל־אֲחֹרֵיהֶם וּבָשִׁים, וְאִין מִבְּרַח לֶךְ בִּי אִם־יִקְוִשִׁים, וַיָּנוּעוּ וַיִּזְוְעוּ קָרָשִׁים, כְּנִשְׂאֵי הָעֵמָרִים בְּדִישִׁים, וּפַעַם תַּעֲשֶׂה מֵהֶם גְּדִישִׁים, וְעַתָּה חֲחֹלָשָׁם דָּמוּ נְחָשִׁים, כְּצַפְעָנִים וְאִין לָהֶם לְחָשִׁים; וְהַתְרֵן וְהִנֵּם נַחֲלָשִׁים, כְּתַחֲתִים שָׁנִים כְּשִׁלְשִׁים, וְנָשִׁים וְאֲנָשִׁים— נֶאֱנָשִׁים, וְקִצּוֹ הַגּוֹיוֹת בְּנִפְשִׁים, וְאִין חֲמֻדָּה לְתַחֲבֹלַת יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְנִהְפְּכוּ לִקְנִים תְּבֵרוֹשִׁים, וּבְרוּלֵי אֲדָנִים כַּחֲשָׁשִׁים, וְאֵת פָּנָה לִקְדָּשׁ הַקִּדְּשִׁים, אֲשֶׁר עַל־כָּל־לִבָּבוֹת הֵם חֲרוֹשִׁים, בַּעֲת שִׁינְגָּרְשׁוּ מִיָּמָיו רַפְּשִׁים, וַיִּזְכֹּר־לְךָ זְכוּת אֲבוֹת קִדְּשִׁים! לְפָנָיו שִׁיר מַחּוֹל מַחֲלִים וּמוֹשִׁים, וַיַּחֲיוּ הָעֲצָמִים הַיְבֵּשִׁים, עֲדָרִים עַל־פָּנָי אֶרֶץ נִטְשִׁים, צָבָא מְרוֹם וְעָלְיוֹ שֵׁר חֲמִשִּׁים— וְכַתְּכֹלַת בְּמִלָּאת גְּבִישִׁים, בְּגָרִים מִמְּעוֹנֵיהֶם גְּרוֹשִׁים, בָּלֵב הֵם כְּלֹהָבוֹת וְאִשִּׁים, עָדִי לֵיל מְטַהֲרִים לְטוֹשִׁים, שְׁנִיָּהֶם אִזּוֹ שְׁנֵי יָמִים חֲבוּשִׁים— בְּשׂוֹא גְּלִי שְׁכַחֲתִי הַחֲדָשִׁים!	הַתְּרַדֵּף נַעֲרוֹת אַחֵר חֲמִשִּׁים? וּתְבַרַח מֵעֲבֹדַת הָאֱלֹהִים, וּתְדַרֵּשׁ אֶת פְּנֵי־רַבִּים, וְתַטֵּשׁ וְתַעֲצֹל לְהִצְטִיד לְדֶרֶכְךָ, הֲלֹא אֲמָרָה לֶךְ עוֹד נִפְשֶׁךָ: הוֹן!— נִטָּה מֵעַל עֲצָתָה אֶל־עֲצַת־אֵל, וְהַתְרַצֶּה לִיצְרָךְ בִּיתֵר וְאֶל־תְּדַרֵּשׁ בְּלֵב וְלֵב רְצוֹנוֹ, הֲיִיה לַעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹנוֹ עוֹ בְּנִמֵּר וְאֶל־יְמוּט בְּלֵב יָמִים לְכַבֵּךְ, וּמִלְּחִים יְדִיהֶם כְּמִלְּחָם, שְׂמֵחִים הַלֵּכִים נֹכַח פְּנֵיהֶם— וְאֶקְיָנוֹס לְפָנֶיךָ לְמָנוֹס, וְיָמוּטוּ וַיָּנוּטוּ קָלְעִים, וַיִּדְרֹוּחַ מִצְחָקָת כְּמִים, וּפַעַם תַּעֲשֶׂה מֵהֶם גְּרָנוֹת, בַּעֲת הַתְּגַבֵּרֶם דָּמוּ אֲרִיּוֹת, וְרֹאשֵׁנִים דִּלְקוּם אֲחֻרָנִים וְצִי אֲדִיר כָּקֵט יֵפֶל בְּאֲדִיר, וְהַתְּבַח וְקִנְיָה גְּבָכִים, וּמִשְׁכֵּי הַחֲבָלִים— בַּחֲבָלִים, וְרוּחַ חֲבֻלָּה מַחֲבִלֵיהֶם, וְאִין יִתְרוֹן לַחֲזֹק הַתְּרַנִּים, וְנִחְשָׁבוּ לְקֵשׁ תְּרִנֵּי אֲרָזִים, וְנִטָּל חוֹל בְּגַב הַיָּם כְּתִבָּן, וְעַם יִתְפַּלְלוּ כְּל־אִישׁ לְקִדְּשׁוֹ— וְתִזְכֹּר מִפְּלֹאוֹת יַם־סוּף וַיִּרְדֵּן, תְּשַׁבַּח לְמִשְׁבִּיחַ שְׂאוֹן יָם, וְתִזְכֹּר־לוֹ זְכוּת לְבוֹת טִמְאִים— יַחֲדָשׁ נוֹרְאוֹתָיו בִּי תַחֲדָשׁ וְיָשִׁיב הַנִּשְׁמוֹת לְפָגְרִים, וְרַנֵּעַ יִשְׁתַּקּוּ גְּלִים, וַיִּדְמוּ וְהַלִּיל— כְּבוֹא שְׁמֶשׁ בְּמַעְלוֹת כְּכוֹשִׁית מִשְׁבָּצוֹת זָהָב לְבוּשָׁה, וְכוֹכָבִים בְּלֵב הַיָּם גְּבָכִים, וְכַדְמוּתֶם בְּצִלְמָם יַעֲשׂוּ אוֹר פָּנֵי מִים וְשָׁמַיִם עֲדִי־יָם וְיָם דּוֹמָה לְרַקִּיעַ בְּעֵינָיו, וּבִינּוֹתֶם לְכַבִּי יָם שְׁלִישִׁי,
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A man in your fifties—and you still would be young?
Soon your life will have flown like a bird from a branch!
Yet you shirk the service of God, and crave the service of men,
And run after the many, and shun the One
From whom the multitudes of all things come,
And laze about instead of setting out
On your true way, and for a mess of pottage
Sell your immortal part. Has not your soul had enough?
Why then yield each day to its lusts?
Leave its counsel for God’s, put the five senses aside,
And make amends to your Maker before your last days rush away.
Don’t pretend you have to seek to know His will,
Or wait for auguries. Will but to do it!
Be bold as a panther, swift as a deer!
Fear not the open sea, though mountains of waves crest and crash,
And hands shake like rags in a gale,
And speechless ships’ carpenters quail,
And crews leap to the task and in dismay stagger back,
Trapped in an ocean with nowhere to flee
While the sails flap and crack, and the deck creaks and groans,
And the wind whips the water into haystack-high bales.
One day it towers like ricks and the next it’s flat as a field,
A ripple of snakes without even a whisper or hiss.
Yet when roiled to a prideful of lions, each hot on the other one’s heels,
Mighty fleets reel and are wrecked. Masts totter and fall;
Bulwarks are breeched; the tiers of great triremes are pierced,
Unmanning their oarsmen; men, women, grow faint with dread;
Sailors stand stunned by their shrouds; the living would rather be dead;
The heft of the yards counts for nothing, for nothing the tricks of old tars;
Tall spars are no stronger than straws; cedar beams snap like stems;
The ballast cast out is but chaff; keels have the resistance of grass.

At such times, when each man prays to what is holy to him,
You turn to face the Holiest of Holies.
Recount, then, stamped in men’s memories,
The wonders of the Red Sea’s parting,
And of the Jordan’s in the days of Joshua.
Praise the Soother of the storms that stir the depths,
The Pardoner of stained souls, who for His sainted Patriarchs’ sakes
Will pardon yours. Sing Him a Levite’s song while He renews
His awesome world, restoring souls to bodies, life to dry bones.
Now, the waves subside; like flocks of sheep they graze upon the sea.
The sun has set, departing by the stairs
Up which ascends the night watch, led by its silver-sworded captain.
The heavens are an African spangled with gold, blue-black
Within a frame of milky crystal. Stars roam the water,
Flare and flicker there, outcasts far from home.
The seaward-dipping sky, the night-clasped sea, both polished bright,
Are indistinguishable, two oceans cupped alike,
Between which, surging with thanksgiving, lies a third, my heart.

הַצִּיקְתָּנִי תְּשׁוּקָתִי לְאֵל הַי

Driven by Longing for the Living God

הַצִּיקְתָּנִי תְּשׁוּקָתִי לְאֵל הַי
לְשַׁחַר אֶת מְקוֹם בְּסֹאוֹת מְשִׁיחִי
עָדִי כִּי לֹא נְטַשְׁתָּנִי לְנִשְׁק
בְּנֵי בֵּיתִי וְאֶת־רַעִי וְאָחִי,
וְלֹא אֲבִיבָה עָלַי פְּרִדָּם נְטַעְתִּיו
וְהִשְׁקִיתִיו וְהִצַּלִּיחוּ צָמְחִי,
וְלֹא אֶזְכֹּר יְהוּדָה וְעִזְרָאֵל
שְׁנֵי פָרְחֵי יָקָר מִבְּחַר פָּרְחֵי,
וְאֵת יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר כָּבֵן חֲשַׁבְתִּיו
יָכוֹל שְׂמֵשִׁי וְטוֹב גֶּרֶשׁ יֶרְחִי.

וְכַמְעַט אֲשַׁכְּחָה בֵּית הַתְּפִלָּה
אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ בְּמִדְרָשָׁיו מְנוּחִי,
וְאֲשַׁכְּחַ תַּעֲנוּגֵי שִׁבְתִּי
וְהַדְרַת מוֹעֲדֵי וּכְבוֹד פֶּסַחִי,
וְאֶתֶּן אֶת כְּבוֹדִי לְאַחֵרִים
וְאֶעֱזֹב לְפִסְיִלִּים אֶת שִׁבְכִי.
הַמִּירְתִּי בְּצֵל שִׁיחִים הָדָרִי
וּבְמִשׁוֹכַת סִבְךְ חֶסֶן בְּרִיחִי,
וְנִפְשִׁי שֶׁבַעַה רָאשֵׁי בְּשָׂמִים
וְרִיחַ נַעֲצוּץ שְׂמֵתִי רִקְנִי,
וְחִדְלַתִּי הַלּוֹךְ עַל כַּף וְעַל אֶף
וְנָתַתִּי בְּלֵב יָמִים אַרְבֵּי
עָדִי אֶמְצֵא הָדוֹם רַגְלִי אֶלְהִי.

וְשָׁמָּה אֲשַׁכְּכָה נַפְשִׁי וְשִׁיחִי
וְאֶסְתַּוְּפֶה בְּהָר קִדְשׁוֹ, וְאֶקְבִּיל
לְפָתְחִי שַׁעֲרֵי שַׁחַק פֶּתַחִי,
וְאֶפְרִיחַ בְּמִי יִרְדֵּן נָרְדִּי
וְאֲשַׁלִּיחַ בְּשִׁלַּח שְׁלָחִי.
אֶדְנִי לִי וְאִיךְ אִירָא וְאֶפְחַד
וּמִלֵּאךְ רַחֲמָיו נִשָּׂא שְׁלָחִי?
אֶהַלֵּל אֶת שְׁמוֹ מִדֵּי חַיּוֹתִי
וְאוֹדְנוּ עָדִי נֶצַח נֶצְחִי.

Driven by longing
for the living God
to hasten to where
His anointed ones dwelt,
I had no time
to kiss my friends
or family
a last farewell;
no time to weep
for the garden I grew,
the trees watered and watched
as they branched and did well;
no time to think
of the blossoms they bore,
of Yehuda
and Azarel,
or of Yitzhak,
so like a son,
my sun-blessed crop,
the years' rich yield.

Forgotten are
my synagogue,
the peace that was
its study hall,
my Sabbaths
and their sweet delights,
the splendor of
my festivals:
I've left them all.
Let others have
the idol's honors
and be hailed—
I've swapped my bedroom
for dry brush,
its safety
for wild chaparral,
the scents
and subtle fragrances
that cloyed my soul
for thistles' smells,
and put away
the mincing gait
of landlubbers
to hoist my sail
and cross the sea
until I reach
the land that is
the Lord's footstool.

There will I
pour out my heart
and huddle by
His holy hill,
and pitch my tent
at heaven's gate,
and irrigate
from Jordan's rill
and the pool
of Siloam
the sacred spikenard
of my soul.
I am the Lord's
and fear no ill
as long as His
own angels shall
take up cudgels
for me while
I praise Him till
my breath falls still.

In this poem, we see Halevi finally setting out on the voyage he had debated for years. The poem's "drivenness," with its opening description of a hasty departure from Spain, led me to render its *m'rubeh*-metered, 11-syllable hemistichs in short three-to-six-syllable lines. I wanted to convey their breathless quality, their feeling that now, his journey begun at last, events were taking place for Halevi with a rapidity that was the opposite of the long delays that preceded it. Since this makes the English poem many lines longer than the Hebrew one, I have broken the latter into separate stanzas that do not exist in Halevi's version.

Of the three names mentioned in this poem, only one can be certainly identified, that of Halevi's grandson Yehuda. (Sephardic Jews, unlike Ashkenazim, permitted the naming of children for living grandparents.) A second may be that of Halevi's son-in-law Yitzhak ibn Ezra, son of the renowned Hebrew poet, Bible critic, and polymath Avraham ibn Ezra. Azriel could have been a second grandson, but this is conjectural. The poem was apparently written in the course of a land journey that was to be followed by a sea voyage.

קראו עלי בנות ומשפחות

A Letter from Aboard Ship

קראו עלי בנות ומשפחות
 שלום, ועל אחים ועל אהות,
 מאת אסיר תקנה אשר נקנה
 לים, ושם רוחו ביד רוחות,
 דחוי ביד מערב ליד מזרח,
 זה יעבור לנחות וזה לדחות.
 בינו ובינ מות כפשע, אך
 בינו ובינ מועה לוחות,
 קבור בחיי בארון עץ, לא
 קרקע ולא ארבע ולא פחות,
 יושב ואין לעמד עלי רגליו,
 שוכב ואין רגליו משלחות,
 חולה ויירא מפני גוים
 גם מפני לסטים ומרוחות.
 חבל ומלח כל בני פרח
 הם הסגנים שם והפחות;
 לא לחכמים שם וגם לא חן
 ליודעים, רק יודעים לשחות.
 יתעצבו רגע לזאת פני:
 איך יעלו הלב והטוחות
 עד אשפכה נפשי בחיק האל
 נכה מקום ארון ומזבחות?
 אגמל לאל גומל לחיבים
 טובות, בטוב שירות ותשבחות.

To sisters, brothers, family, and friends:

Greetings from one,

a prisoner of hope sold to the sea,

his spirit hostage to the winds

that blow from west to east and back again!

Between him and death is nothing more

than a thin sliver of a board

(unless death already has occurred,

since he is buried in a wooden box

six feet under water without a coffin's worth of space).

Seasick and scared of pirates, tempests, and Mohammedans,

he sits because there isn't room to stand,

lies down and has no place to put his feet.

The captain is a brute, the crew are no-accounts,

yet they're this kingdom's king and counts

with whom no education counts if you can't swim.

I'll tell you, though, what makes them glum:

It's when I smile because I know

that soon I'll lay my soul in my Lord's lap.

There, where once His ark and altar stood,

I'll thank Him, requiter of men's guilt with good,

with all the song and praise I can bestow.

Halevi sailed for Palestine via Egypt in the summer of 1140, when he was in his late sixties, and "A Letter From Aboard Ship" may have been posted by him to family and friends in Spain from one of the North African ports his vessel docked in on its way to Alexandria. Alternately, however, it may have been a mere poetic conceit. In either case, it is a playful poem, in response to which I allowed myself a free arrangement on the page of its twelve distichs.

The poem's account of a 12th-century sea voyage is entirely accurate. Medieval ships were small, crowded, and unsanitary, and their passengers slept one against another in an unventilated hold beneath the deck and prayed they would not be capsized by storms or attacked by pirates. Halevi's high spirits in the face of this testifies to the enormous relief felt by him at finally being on his way.

הָבָא מִבּוֹל

At Sea

Although Mediterranean sea captains in the Middle Ages generally sought to stay close to land, they sometimes strayed out of sight of it in good weather, as Halevi's ship is described in this poem as having done. I have partially reproduced the poem's monorhyme by slant-rhyming all 17 lines of my translation: "land," "ground," "man," "remained," "sand," "mind," etc. While these may not have the same effect as the single repeated –va of the Hebrew, they do give some idea of it.

הָבָא מִבּוֹל וְשֵׁם תֵּבֵל הָרָבָה
וְאֵין לְרֵאוֹת פְּנֵי אֶרֶץ הָרָבָה,
וְאֵין אָדָם וְאֵין חַיָּה וְאֵין עוֹף?
הַסֵּף הַכֹּל וְשָׁכְנוֹ מֵעַצְבָּה?
וּבְרֵאוֹת הַיָּם וְשׁוֹחָה לִי מְנוּחָה,
וְאֶרֶץ הָעֲרָבָה לִי עֲרָבָה,
וְאִשְׁגִּיחַ לְכָל עֶבֶר וְאֵין כָּל
אֶבֶל מִיָּם וְשָׁמַיִם וְתֵבָה
וְלֹאִיתָן בְּהֶרְתִּיחוֹ מְצוּלָה,
וְאֶחָשֵׁב כִּי תֵהוֹם יַחֲשֵׁב לְשִׁיכָה
וְלֵב הַיָּם יִכְחֹשׁ בְּאֵנִיָּה
כְּבָאֵלוֹ הִיא בְּיַד הַיָּם גְּנֵבָה.
וַיִּם יִזְעַף וְנִפְשִׁי תַעֲלֹ, כִּי
אֵלֵי מִקְדָּשׁ אֱלֹהֶיהָ קָרָבָה.

Has a new Flood drowned the land
And left no patch of dry ground,
Neither bird, beast, nor man?
Has nothing remained?
A strip of bare sand
Would be balm for the mind;
The dreariest plain,
A pleasure to scan.
But all that is seen
Is a ship and the span
Of the sea and the sky, and Leviathan
As he churns up the brine,
Which shakes its white mane,
Gripping the ship as the hand
Of a thief grips its find.
Let it foam! My heart bounds
As I near the Lord's shrine.

ראה ערים

Egypt

ראה ערים והתבונן פְּרוֹזוֹת אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל אַחֲזוֹת,
 וְתֵן כְּבוֹד לְמִצְרַיִם, וְהִקְל פְּעַמֶּיךָ וְאֵל תִּדְרוּךְ עֲזוֹזוֹת
 בַּחוּצוֹת עֲבָרָה בָּם הַשְׂכִּינָה לְבִקֵּשׁ דָּם בְּרִית עַל הַמְּזוֹזוֹת,
 וְעָמוּד אִישׁ וְעָמוּדֵי עֲנָנִים, וְעֵינַי כָּל מְצֻפּוֹת בָּם וְחוֹזוֹת,
 וּמִשָּׁם חָצְבוּ בַּעֲלֵי בְרִית אֵל וּפְנֹת עִם אֲדָנֶי שָׁם גְּרוֹזוֹת.

These great cities, these country villages,
 Were of old lived in by Israel.
 All honor then to Egypt!
 Tread gingerly in streets
 Through which God's presence roamed,
 Seeking His blood-pact on the doors.
 Columns of fire, columns of cloud,
 Seen by every eye!
 The people of the Covenant carved out,
 Its mighty cornerstones
 Cut for the ages!

Letters discovered in the Cairo Geniza in the 1950s tell us that Yehuda Halevi landed in Alexandria in early September, 1140 and remained there until mid-May, 1141. Although the length of his stay might seem to indicate a renewed uncertainty about continuing on to Palestine, the difficulties were in fact largely logistical. Yet Halevi was deeply impressed by the richness and lushness of Egypt and by its wealthy and sophisticated Jewish community. Moreover, he felt he was already treading on semi-sacred ground, since much of the biblical account of the Patriarchs, as well as the entire story of the exodus, takes place in Egypt. The biblical references in this poem are to the blood of the paschal sacrifice that the fleeing Israelites painted on their door jambs and to the columns of cloud and fire that led them through the desert to the Red Sea.

אֱלֹהֵי פִּלְאֶךָ דּוֹר דּוֹר יִרְחֶשׁ

From Age to Age

אֱלֹהֵי פִּלְאֶךָ דּוֹר דּוֹר יִרְחֶשׁ וּמִפִּי אָב לְבָנִים לֹא יִכְחָשׁ,
וְזֶה הַיָּאֹר לְעַד כִּי דָם הִפְכָּתוּ בְּלֹא לֶהֱטֹ וְלֹא קָסַם וְנָחַשׁ,
אֲבָל שְׁמֶךָ בְּיַד מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן וְהַמַּטֶּה אֲשֶׁר נִהַפְּךָ לְנָחָשׁ,
הָיָה עֹז לְעַבְדְּךָ הָאֱמִינִן בְּךָ וּלְרֵאוֹת אֶת מְקוֹמוֹת פִּלְאֶךָ חֵשׁ!

From age to age Your wonders, God, are told
And not denied by father or by son.
This river Nile has always testified
To how its waters were turned into blood.
No hierophants performed the magic trick,
But only Your name and Moses and Aaron's rod,
Transformed by You into a hissing snake.
Help then Your trusting servant to make haste
To a place more wondrous yet than this!

Halevi remained in Alexandria until mid-November 1140, staying at the home of the prominent, Jerusalem-born rabbinical judge Aharon el-Ammani before traveling up the Nile to Fustat or old Cairo. Watching the great river flow, he felt he was looking at the same water that Moses and Aaron had turned to blood with a wave of their staffs in the first of the Ten Plagues. Yet as he was to write elsewhere, whereas God's presence in Egypt had been "like a traveler's,/ Resting in the shade beneath a tree,/ In Zion, it's at home and dwells/ Grandly, as all Scripture tells." Egypt was once the site of sacred events. The Land of Israel—"a place more wondrous yet than this"—was sacred. Nothing he saw in Egypt could take its place.

יְפִי קוֹל קָדְמוֹ כְּנוֹר לִיפּוֹת

from “Let’s Have More Lutes for the Lovely Girls”

At a dinner party in Fustat, Yehuda Halevi took part in a poetic competition in which the guests were asked to improvise a tribute to the absent Aharon el-Ammani. He chose to do so in the form of a *qasida*, choosing for its preliminary theme a musical concert he had recently attended. Facing the garden that its male audience sat in was a latticed window through which a crowd of attractive young women had gathered to watch. It was easier for Halevi to let his eyes stray in their direction when the singers were silent, and his poem, reliving this moment, begins with an appeal for the instrumentalists to play by themselves before turning to a teasing description of the female beauty that, too old to bid for its favors, the aging poet can still appreciate.

“Laban’s daughter” is the biblical Rachel, who dutifully runs to tell her father that Jacob has kissed her at the well. Only the first part of the *qasida* appears here. It represents, one might say, an old man’s last, wry experience of sexual desire, whose cessation frees the soul to contemplate beauty undisturbed by the wish to possess it, yet whose unexpected return, if only for a final parting, comes as an even greater moment of grace.

יְפִי קוֹל קָדְמוֹ כְּנוֹר לִיפּוֹת
וְשָׂרִים אַחֲרֵי נְגִנִים חֲלִיפּוֹת,
עֲלָמוֹת לַעֲלָמוֹת נַעֲלָמוֹת
וְנִשְׁקָפוֹת בְּעַד אֶשְׁנָב וְצָפוֹת,
בְּתוֹלוֹת לְמָדוֹ מִבֵּית בְּתוּאֵל
קִדְשֵׁת טְהֵרֶת לְבוֹת וְגוֹפּוֹת,
אֲבָל כִּי מִשְׁכּוֹ קִשְׁתָּ לְתַמָּם
וְהִרְגוּ אִישׁ, וְהֵם זִכּוֹת וְחָפוֹת
אֲשֶׁר לֹא שָׁאֲלוּ לְקָרֵב חֲרָבוֹת
וְדִים בִּזְרָעוֹת הַחֲשׂוֹפוֹת.
וְאֵיךְ נִשְׂאוּ צְמִידִים אוֹ צַעֲדוֹת
עֲצָלוֹת מִנְּשׂוֹא עֲפָעָף יַעֲפוֹת?
וְלוֹ נִשְׂאוּ אֵלַי חֲמָה פְּנִיָּהם
אֲזִי עֲזָבוּ פָּנַי חֲמָה שְׂזוּפוֹת!
וְתֹאמְרָנָה יְהִי חֲשֵׁךְ יְהִי אוֹר
בְּאוֹר פָּנִים וּבִשְׁחוֹר מַחֲלָפוֹת,
וּכְתָנוֹת אוֹר בְּאוֹר חֲבָרָה לְבוֹשׁוֹת
בְּלִיל שֶׁעַר בְּלִיל פִּירוֹד צְנוּפוֹת,
מְאוֹרוֹת נָתְנוּ לְבִי רְקִיעִים
תְּסוּכְכְּנָה עָלַי כְּמָה תְּקוּפוֹת,
וְיֵשׁ לְשִׁגּוֹת בְּרָכוֹת וְעֲנָנוֹת
וּפּוֹרִיּוֹת עֲבָתוֹת וְעֲנִיפוֹת,
וּפִיפִיּוֹת יְפֵהפִיּוֹת אֲדָמוֹת
עָלַי טוֹרִי בְּדִלְחִים רְצוּפוֹת.
לֹאט בְּמִשְׁקָרוֹת וּמִשְׁקָרוֹת לִי,
לֹאט בָּהֶן וְלוֹ הָיוּ חֲנִיפוֹת,
מִסְּבָלוֹת בְּתַפּוּחַ וְרִמּוֹן
וְשׁוֹשְׁנִים וְעָלִיהֶן תְּרוּפוֹת!
וּמָה אָמַר בְּהוֹד קוֹמָה בְּתִמָּר
וְהָרוּחַ יְנִיפָה תְּנוּפוֹת?
רְאֵה כִּי נִטְרָפוּ לְבוֹת לְקַחוּם!
שְׁאֵל הַיִּשְׁלָמוֹ אֶת הַטְּרָפוֹת,
וְאִם לְקַחוּ נָקָם צִיצֵת לְחִיָּהם
אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ בְּעֵינֵינוּ קְטוּפוֹת?

Let’s have more lutes
For the lovely girls,
You sweet singers!
Give the instrumentalists their chance
To serenade the secrets sirens
Looking through the lattice!
Well-behaved they learned to be
From Laban’s daughter at the well;
Is it their fault,
Unwitting archers that they are,
That their arrows have pierced hearts,
Though their bare arms
Never sought to lift a sword?
So languidly they move
That you would think
They could barely lift an eyebrow,
Much less bear
The armor of their ankle-bands and bracelets.
One look at the sun from them
And it would be sunburned!
“Let there be light,” they say,
And it shines in their faces;
“Let it be dark”—
It’s in their raven tresses.
Their tunics are bright
Like the splendors of friendship;
Their hair is as black
As the gloom of goodbyes.
They’re so like stars
That I would be the sky
In which they orbited forever.
Full or delicate, lush, lithe, or lanky—
I could fall for them all
And for their perilous red mouths,
Each perfect with two rows of pearly crystal.
Be gentle if you catch them making eyes
(At me, I hope),
Gentle with their wives,
For they are burdened by
Silver bells of apples and of pomegranates,
And roses sprinkled with rare essences.
And what about that stately one back there,
Swaying like a palm tree in the breeze?
Just count the hearts they’ve stolen!
I ask you:
Will they pay for them,
Or is it retribution
For the curls on their soft cheeks
Our eyes have poached on?

הַפֶּשֶׁט הַזֶּמֶן בְּגֵדֵי הַרְדּוֹת

By the Nile

הַפֶּשֶׁט הַזֶּמֶן בְּגֵדֵי הַרְדּוֹת וְלִבֵּשׁ אֶת בְּגָדָיו הַחֲמוּדוֹת,
וְלִבְשָׁה הָאֲדָמָה יֵשׁ וְרִקְמָה וְעִשְׂתָּה מְשֻׁבָּצוֹת זָהָב רְפִידוֹת?
וְכָל מִזְרַע יְאוּר תִּשְׁבֵּץ בָּאלוֹ נָאוֹת גִּשְׁן בְּחֶשֶׁן הֵן אֶפּוֹדוֹת,
וּמִרְבֵּדֵי נָאוֹת מְדַבֵּר חֲטוּבוֹת וְרַעְמָסִס וּפְתָם פֹּז רְבוּדוֹת.
וְשָׂדֶה עַל שִׁפְתַּת הַיָּאֵר וְשָׂדוֹת צִבְאוֹת הֵם, אֲכָל שֵׁהִם כְּבִדּוֹת,
יְדִיהֶם כְּכֻדּוֹ מִן הַצְּמִידִים וְצָרוּ צַעְדֵיהֶם בְּצַעְדוֹת.
וְלִב יִפְתָּה וְיִשְׁכַּח אֶת זְקוּנָיו וְיִזְכֹּר עוֹד יְלָדִים אוֹ יְלָדוֹת
בְּגֶן עֵדֶן בְּמִצְרַיִם בְּפִישׁוֹן, בְּגִנּוֹת עַל שִׁפְתַּת נְהָר וְשָׂדוֹת.
וְהַקְּמוֹת יִרְקָקוֹת אֲדָמוֹת וְלִרְקָמוֹת מְלֻבְּשׁוֹת בְּגָדוֹת,
וְרוּחַ יָם תִּגְיַפְמוּ, וְנִרְאוּ כְּמוֹ מִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת אֶל אֵל וּמוֹדוֹת.

Has time cast off its grim old clothes
And dressed itself in its holiday best,
And the earth put on an embroidered vest
Festooned with patterns of checkered gold?
The vale of the Nile is a blazon of fields,
The land of Goshen an ocean of grain,
Palm islands etched against the sky,
The glint of far pyramids bright in the sun.

A girl by the banks of the river:
So like gazelles they are, but heavy-laden,
Heavy the bracelets on their arms,
The anklets circling their slim steps.
And the foolish heart forgets how old it is,
And remembers other boys and other girls,
Here, in this paradise of Egypt,
In these gardens, by the river, in these fields.
The yellow stalks are a rich brocade,
And when the sea breeze ripples through them,
They bow and pray in gratitude to God.

During the winter of 1140–41, Halevi took a boat trip up the Nile, from where he wrote a letter to an acquaintance in Fustat that included these lines. Their mood is of a piece with the calm but joyous acceptance of old age's still-enduring ability to respond to beauty that we find in "Let's Have More Lutes For The Lovely Girls." Not far from where the poet stood flowed the river. A bare-armed girl walked beside it. In the distance, where the watered valley yielded to the desert, were the cones of pyramids and the fronds of oases rising from the sands. A north wind bent the stalks of wheat low. An old man about to set out on his last journey, Halevi was filled with a great thankfulness for everything.

בְּשׁוּטֵי מַעֲבְרוֹת מִזְרָח וְתִימָן

On Shlomo ibn Gabbai

בְּשׁוּטֵי מַעֲבְרוֹת מִזְרָח וְתִימָן, יְחִידִי מִבְּלִי קְרוֹב בְּאֶלְמָן,
שְׁאֵלוֹנִי: "הִתְצַטִּיד בְּלִי יָד וְאֵין חוּמַל לְרַעְבוֹנְךָ וְרַחֲמֶיךָ?"
עֲנִיתִים: "הַזֶּמֶן זָמַן לְיָדִי אָחִי צֶדֶק וְאִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנֶאֱמָן
אֲשֶׁר מִן יֶאֱכִילֵנִי בְּכָל יוֹם וּמִטְעָמָיו בְּפִי – מִמֶּתֶק וּמִשָּׂמֶן."
וְאָמְרוּ: "אֵין בְּתִבֵּל מֶן!" עֲנִיתִים: "וְאִם אֵין מֶן בְּתִבֵּל – שֵׁם אָחִי מֶן."

An ever-eastward wanderer,
Lone as a childless widower,
I'm asked, "How could you get along
Without the kindness of a helping hand?"
"My luck," I say, "is that a righteous man
Feeds me manna every day
That tastes like sweets and choice viands."
"Manna?" they say. "Don't you anachronize?"
"Not," I reply, "when it's Ibn-Gabbai's!"

Shlomo ibn Gabbai was one of two young traveling companions who accompanied Yehuda Halevi from Spain to Egypt, where he remained devotedly by his side. The other was Halevi's son-in-law, Yitzhak ibn Ezra, who informed Halevi in Fustat that he did not intend to return to his family in Spain. For Halevi, who had to blame his voyage for his daughter's loss of her husband, this was a bitter blow.

Though humorous, Halevi's tribute to Shlomo ibn Gabbai is heartfelt. A literal translation of its final Hebrew distich would be: "They said: 'There is no manna in this world.' I answered: 'If there isn't, there is manna's brother.'" "Manna's brother" is *ahī man*, a pun on the biblical name Ahiman in the Book of Numbers. When a play on words can't be gracefully conveyed in translation, the translator has to try something different in meaning but similar in spirit, which is what I sought to do here.

לעת כזאת

On Boarding Ship in Alexandria

לעת כזאת תכל עיני ותרד ותשים נחלי דמעי במורד
אשר התלקחו ביקוד לבבי בהתלקח יקוד גחל פברד.
תמול נקל פרד יצחק בעיני, ואם יתר לבבי לו וחרד,
אבל נד ממקומו על שלמה אשר נד ועזבני מפרד.
איאש מראות אחי ורעי – וזה סוף כל ידי מספרד!

At such a time, my eyes can't hold
The tears back any more.
They pour like hailstones,
Hot from a storm-wracked heart.
To part from Yitzhak was the easy part,
Even though the shock of it was rude.
But now that Shlomo is gone too,
I'm left in solitude
With no hope of seeing anyone again.
And that's the last of all my friends from Spain!

Halevi boarded the ship that took him to the Land of Israel on May 7, 1141. Although he was winced and dined constantly during his months in Egypt, not a single one of his hosts volunteered to travel with him to Palestine, whose Crusader rulers had a reputation for viciousness and were greatly feared. Having already parted angrily from Yitzhak ibn Ezra in Fustat, he now said goodbye to Shlomo ibn Gabbai, describing it in one of the simplest and most moving poems he ever wrote.

הָרֶף שְׂאוֹן יָם

On Parting from Aharon Al-Ammani

הָרֶף שְׂאוֹן יָם עַד אֲשֶׁר יִקְרַב תִּלְמִיד וַיִּשָּׁק אֶת פְּנֵי הָרֶב.
 יָד אַהֲרֹן הָרֶב, אֲשֶׁר שִׁבְטוֹ לֹא נָס נְעִים לַחַה וְלֹא הָרֶב,
 לִמַּד וְלֹא אָמַר לְפִיהוּ "הוֹן," פֶּזֶר וְלֹא אָמַר לִידוֹ "רֶב."
 הַיּוֹם אֲנִי מוֹדֶה כִּנָּף מְזֻרָה, כִּי מַחֲרַת אֶקַּב כִּנָּף מַעֲרָב,
 אֵיךְ יַעֲזֹב אִישׁ אֶת צָרִי גִלְעָד אַחֲרָיו, וְהוּא חוֹלָה נִשְׁוֹף עֶקְרָב,
 אוֹ יַחֲלִיף אֶת צֵל עֲנָף עֲבוֹת בְּחוֹם וּבִקְרָה וּבִשְׂרָב,
 חֲלָף לְצֵל קוֹרֶת נֹת הָרֶב צֵלִי מְעוֹן קִרְיָה לְמֶלֶךְ רֶב?

Be still, you booming surf, enough to let
 A pupil go to kiss his master's cheek.
 (That's Master Aaron, whose unflagging staff
 The years have not made tremulous or weak.)
 A teacher who never says, "The lesson's done,"
 A giver who never fears to give too much,
 He makes me bless the east wind's wings today
 And curse tomorrow's gusts out of the west.
 How can a man who feels as though a scorpion
 Has stung him leave Gilead's balm behind?
 How trade the shade of a grand, leafy tree
 For winter's ice and summer's savagery,
 The shelter of a masterly mansion
 For the shriving of God's rain and sun?

Yehuda Halevi's ship remained in port for a week after boarding its passengers, waiting for the east wind that was blowing to change to a westerly. Passengers were required to stay nearby and Halevi, unable to pay his friend Aharon el-Ammani a last visit, wrote him this poem.

"Master Aaron" and his "unflagging staff" are perfunctory allusions to the biblical Aaron, whose name El-Ammani bore. Yet the poet's wish that the east wind keep blowing is a startling confession of last-minute fear that the Land of Israel might prove to be a disappointment. Always in the many poems written during his sea voyage, Halevi depicted the west wind as his ally, pushing him onward to his destination, and the east wind as a foe holding him back. Now, all this was reversed. Suddenly it was the west wind that was dreaded, threatening to bring Halevi to a land of torrid heat and icy cold in which he would not find his place, while Egypt, the "leafy tree" beneath which the poet had likened God's presence in biblical times to a homeless traveler's, now seemed like home—as indeed Aharon el-Ammani's grand mansion in Alexandria had been for many months.

הַזֶּה רוּחַךְ צֵד מֵעָרֵב רָקוּחַ

West Wind

זֶה רוּחַךְ צֵד מֵעָרֵב רָקוּחַ,
הֵנִיךְ בְּכַנְפָיו וְהִתְפּוּחַ—
מֵאוֹצְרוֹת הָרֶכֶלִים מוֹצֵאךְ
כִּי אֵינְךָ מֵאוֹצְרוֹת הָרוּחַ.
בְּנִפִי דְרוֹר תִּנְיֶף וְתִקְרָא לִי דְרוֹר
וּבְמֶרְדְּרוֹר מִן הַצָּרוֹר לָקוּחַ.
מִה־נִּכְסְפוּ לָךְ עִם אֲשֶׁר בְּגִלְלָךְ
רָכְבוּ בְּגַב יָם עָלֵי גַב־לוּחַ!
אֶל נָא תִרְפֶּה יָדְךָ מִן הָאֲנִי
כִּי יִחַנֶּה הַיּוֹם וְכִי יָפוּחַ,
וְרַקַּע תִּהְיוּם וְקִרַּע לִבִּב יָמִים, וְגַע
אֶל הָרִי קִדְשׁ וְשֵׁם תִּנּוּחַ,
וְגַעַר בְּקָדִים הַמִּסְעֵר יָם עָדִי
יִשִּׁים לִבִּב הַיָּם כְּסִיר נָפוּחַ!
מִה יַעֲשֶׂה אֲסוּר בְּיַד הַצּוֹר אֲשֶׁר
פָּעַם יְהִי עֲצוּר וְעַת שְׁלוּחַ?
אֶךְ סוּד שְׂאֵלָתִי בְּיַד מָרוֹם, וְהוּא
יוֹצֵר מָרוֹם הָרִים וּבוֹרֵא רוּחַ.

Spikenard-and-apple-tinged,
Winged from the west,
You, wind,
Come not from the Cavern of Winds,
But from the storerooms of a spice merchant:
Scented like incense,
Swift as a bird,
Bearing my freedom.
How you were longed for
By those who rode
The sea's back this far
While they bestrode
The deck of a bark!
Stay not your hand from us now.
Fill our sails, long becalmed.
Stamp flat the depths.
Part the water in two.
Rest not till you reach the most sacred of mounts.
Rebuff the easterlies that stir the sea like a bubbling stew!
Now leashed, now loosed—
What could a Lord-lashed prisoner do
But trust in him,
Maker of mountains and winds,
To send you?

The wind, letters from the Cairo Geniza tell us, finally changed on May 14, the day on which Halevi's ship sailed. Since May 14, 1141, was the first day of the holiday of Shavu'ot, on which writing was forbidden (sailing on the holiday, on the other hand, was permitted by rabbinic law), we know that this poem could not have been written, as it was long thought to have been, on that day. Rather, it must have been composed in similar circumstances en route to Egypt, in a North African port where, too, east winds had held up Halevi's voyage. Yet there is nothing to keep us from imagining Halevi thinking of it as his ship raised its sails in Alexandria. Did his heart rebound as they went up, his doubts and fears drop away like the stage fright of an actor when the curtain rises? No more poems of his have survived to tell us. We know only, informed again by letters from the Geniza, that he died less than three months later, in July or early August, in the Land of Israel.

The Hebrew Types of Guillaume Le Bé

From 1559 through 1565, the punchcutter Guillaume Le Bé made a series of Hebrew types that he sold to the Antwerp printer Christophe Plantin, who would use them in the magnificent Polyglot Bible, regarded as one of the masterpieces of typographic art. Le Bé (1525–1598), who had learned his craft with the Paris printer Robert Estienne, had become a specialist in “oriental” languages, especially Hebrew. Settling in Venice by 1546, he produced types for some of the earliest printed editions of the Talmud and other Judaic works for the printers Marc’Antonio Giustiniani, Meir de Parenzo, and others. The types sold to Plantin are Le Bé’s most mature work and, as such, are among the finest of the Golden Age of Hebrew printing—bold, elegant, spirited, and easy to read.

The Hebrew types used here are digital versions of Le Bé’s types made by Matthew Carter and Scott-Martin Kosofsky. They are very close renderings of two sizes of the original types, the larger *gros double canon*, and the *texte*, both of which survive at the Plantin-Moretus Museum, in Antwerp. This is their début appearance. Historical type forms have not played a significant role in modern Hebrew typography, as they have in Latin types, but we hope this might inspire further interest. The other types used in this e-book are Garamond Small Text, by Robert Slimbach, and Trinité, by Bram de Does.